

THE POETIC STRAIN IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S NOVELS



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Preface

Virginia Woolf is essentially a poet, who has written novels, and not poetry. For her the conventional novel is meant only to depict and arouse emotions. Carrying further the arguments of Hardy and Conrad, she has illustrated this point from Lathering Heights, War and Peace and Moby Dick. Her own novels are masterpieces of sensitive and melancholy poetry. Though in her opinion prose, and not poetry, can best express the windings and changes which are typical of the modern mind, yet the novel should be inseparable from suggestive and saturated poetry. Her prose narratives have many characteristics of poetry. In her novels, the immediacy of narrow framework, intensity of situations, the persuasive mood of the narrative, language itself and an extensive use of symbols and metaphors create a definite and resonant poetic atmosphere. By ignoring the orderly chronological sequence of the story, she achieves the suggestiveness of the poetic medium. In her opinion, the poetic novel is in conflict with the accepted order of things, and the tension it deals with approximates to a poetic tension, which is reflected in every word and pattern of imagery. She repeatedly asserts that poetry must pervade every kind of literature. This is the reason why E. M. Forster points out that Virginia Woolf's problem is that she is

essentially a poet, and not a novelist, and wants to create something as near to a novel as possible.

There have come out many studies of Virginia Woolf's fiction from various angles. Also, we find a few pages here and there dealing with the poetic strain in her writings. But so far no full-length study of her novels has been undertaken from this point of view. Hence the need and justification for a comprehensive study of this aspect of Virginia Woolf's novels. The primary purpose of this thesis is to trace, in detail, the true scope and significance of poetry in Virginia Woolf's novels.

I cannot close these prefatory remarks without expressing my gratitude to Dr. K.K. Sharma, who has supervised my research work. I feel indebted to him for his unfailing help, affection and guidance. I have no words to express the pleasure and gratitude which I feel after working under him. My work owes its very existence to his suggestions, help and encouragement.

In the end, acknowledgement must be made to various libraries without whose help no scholarly work can ever be possible. The Librarians of the National Library, Calcutta; the British Council and the U.S.L.S. Library, Delhi; the Azad Library, A.M.U., Aligarh; the Banaras Hindu University Library, Varanasi; the University Library, Allahabad rendered me every possible help, for which I am grateful to them. I also acknowledge indebtedness to all the scholars who have written on Virginia Woolf.

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Chapter I

The Poetic Novel in English and Virginia Woolf

The very idea of the poetic novel is best presented in the critical and creative writings of Virginia Woolf. No doubt, varied poetic elements are easily traceable in the novels of other novelists also, but the concept of the poetic novel has gained authenticity with the publication of Virginia Woolf's works, both expository and creative. For her, the creation of this new type of the novel is a permanent criterion of the significance of a work of art. She does not indulge in descriptive lyricism or in merely writing affected prose to generate poetic atmosphere. She consciously introduces a creative poetry in her prose narratives. Permeating the very texture of her works, poetry becomes the very essence of her writings.

Virginia Woolf conveys with unequalled delicacy the complicated sensation of living from moment to moment, each moment having its own descriptive complexity of colour, texture and shape. She evokes poetry to enhance the effect of her prose, to apprehend life and its emotions intensely, and to present evocatively the scenes, environment and atmosphere. The depth, range and subtlety of her novels is the result of the underlying, suggestive framework saturated with poetry.

An examination of the poetic note in the works of other novelists preceding Virginia Woolf will help us in comprehending and assessing the poetic novel and Virginia Woolf's definite, matchless contribution to it. Perhaps it is in Dickens's fictional works that we first of all unfailingly perceive poetry. Usually considered an inimitable entertainer and a great social reformer and realist, Dickens is gifted with a wide sweep of imagination and a startling word-power, which lend an undercurrent of poetry to his novels. In his earlier novels the world and human beings are presented from a child's point of view. Dickens vividly portrays the child's mannerisms, nervous gestures, petty tricks, habits of speech and repetitions with a view to suggesting a deep and different combination of meanings, which impart a poetic dimension to his fiction. Some of the most wonderful scenes of his novels are those in which people, presumably in the act of conversation, aptly soliloquize. His technique is to give the soliloquizer a fantastic, private language which is highly poetic and suggestive.¹ Dickens is fertile and exuberant in comic invention so much so that his language possesses "a lyrical quality almost of poetry."²

1 Dorothy Van Chent, The English Novel : Form and Function (New York : Holt, 1953), p. 207.

2 Walter Allen, The English Novel (Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), p. 162.

Dickens's vision of human beings conditions his view of the world. He is master in building atmosphere by mere suggestions. In a finely lucid atmosphere of fairy tale in Great Expectations, he uses a kind of montage, a superimposing of one image upon another with an immediate effect of hallucination. In Great Expectations Estella walks the casks in the old brewery. Her walking the casks is a normal prank of childhood. But in the tableau, Dickens at the same time presents the suicidal figure of Miss Havisham hanging by her neck from a brewery beam. By such superimposition of imagery Dickens is able to suggest his vision of the nervous abnormality. In his novels this device of doubling images is paralleled by his handling of characters.

Dickens' plot development is often reinforced by symbolic movement, which was something new in English fiction in the 19th century. Even in David Copperfield and Domby and Son, we unmistakably see the rich texture of symbolism which is normally found in poetry. Some of his symbols become almost a refrain for comparison and contrast, such as the star symbol which runs throughout Great Expectations. His later novels are highly poetic because of his rich use of symbols. Walter Allen has rightly remarked that "...in the last analysis we respond to the later novels as to great poems, for their effect is that of poetry, the poetry, as David Cecil has suggested, of the late

Elizabethan drama, the plays of Webster and Ford and Tourneur."¹ Dickens is poetic not only because of any special use of language, but also because of the intensity of emotions and his awareness of relationships beneath the conscious level.

The novels of the Brontë sisters abound in poetic elements. Charlotte, the eldest of the three sisters, views life and its experiences with a passionate intensity, which in her novels results in a coherent unity of tone. She has introduced romantic passion to English fiction. She has written about lonely and repressed womanhood with a passion and intensity unsurpassed in English fiction. In her novels the psychological development of passion imparts splendid poetic charm to many passages. This is particularly true of Jane Eyre and Shirley. These novels throb with an inner rhythm obliquely corresponding to the harsh gamut of human suffering. Charlotte Brontë describes the isolated, naked soul responding to life with a maximum of intensity, from which rises the poetic aroma of her novels. In her consummate penetration into the inner world of man, and in creating the weird replica of the interrelationships of uncontrollable passion, she may be compared with Dostoyevsky. Her prose is kinetic, and she grapples with language to express feeling usually inexpressible

¹ Walter Allen, The English Novel, p. 171.

in prose. Her imaginative concepts are constantly matched by her technique, the full blossoming of which we find later on in Virginia Woolf.

The best sample of the poetic novel in the Victorian age is Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights. In its inseparable totality of art and emotional concept, it is as charming as any great lyric poem. It is perfect in the delineation of an exuberantly individual apprehension of man and life in a flawless artistic expression, which can rarely be achieved through the medium of prose. Wuthering Heights is the fullest expression of the shadowy, incoherent and oppressive human existence which is also traceable in Emily's verse. Wuthering Heights is lit up with and transfigured by a tragic splendour rarely seen in English fiction. The atmosphere of the novel is envisaged on a spiritual level, and consequently the characters cannot be judged either from sociological or psychological point of view. The closest parallels to this novel's characters can be found in the creations of Dostoyevsky and Melville. The novel is "conceived at the highest poetic level," and the characters have a definite dynamism "we find normally only in the greatest dramatic poetry."¹

Among the later Victorians, George Eliot, Meredith and Hardy have written prose narratives soaked in poetry.

¹ Walter Allen, The English Novel, p. 197.

George Eliot presents almost the complete experience of life imaginatively. However, like Wordsworth and Hardy she chooses a particular place and a particular time for the full exercise of her creative powers. Patently, the vast design of Middlemarch, the charm of Silas Marner and the excitement of Felix Holt contain exquisite poetry in prose.

It is Meredith, who for the first time consciously introduces the kind of poetry in English fiction which later on Virginia Woolf weaves into the fabric of her novels. His novels are merely one form his poetry takes. His visionary intensity and his unconventional use of language for expressing it evoke a poetic charm. There is an element of fantasy in his novels, but his poetic power makes the situations credible. He blends seriousness, ardour, passion and dedication with the complexity of poetry. His luxuriant imagination delicately portrays a human mind trembling on the verge of half-apprehended self-discovery, which can only be directly shown through poetry. In this respect, he may be regarded as a predecessor of Virginia Woolf.

The later Victorian scene of English fiction is unquestionably dominated by Thomas Hardy. He is usually considered as the English counterpart of the great European novelists -- Flaubert, Zola and Tolstoy. He is basically a storyteller and on his novels we find the shaping influence of the country ballads of passion, revenge and betrayal he knew as a boy. This background gives a poetic

aroma to his novels. He views his characters in their generic aspects, related to weather, natural background and traditional crafts. His characters respond to their deep-rooted passions from which arises his poetry of life. His great tragic characters are conceived poetically and can be apprehended instantly. Instead of detailed psychological analysis, we find in his novels a fine interweaving of intuitive poetry and primitive impercipience. The triumphant moments of his great characters occur in the great emotional and catastrophic situations. Such moments are presented through a primitive and magical poetry which heightens the significance of characters and our awareness of their tragic stature at the same time. Bathsheba's realisation of her sudden subjugation to Troy in the fir plantation in Far from the Madding Crowd is deeply suggestive and poetic without any direct psychological process. The portrayal of the heath in his novels becomes an extended image of nature -- sometimes benevolent, sometimes malevolent -- of which man is a part. Hardy is seemingly preoccupied with a rural world in decline. But his very conception of the novel, as John Holloway puts, is poetic.¹ Evelyn Hardy in his book Thomas Hardy - A Critical Biography admits the presence of lyrical qualities in his novels. In Hardy, the poetry of emotion is supplemented by the poetry of pervasive circumstances. Apropos of this, Walter Allen observes:

¹ John Holloway, "The Literary Scene", The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 7, ed. Boris Ford (Penguin Books, 1983), p. 95.

Poetry is the constant attendant of Hardy's tragic characters. It is not an intellectual poetry, like Meredith's; it is much more primitive and magical, and always it heightens the significance of the characters and the reader's consciousness of their tragic stature. And, as Hardy moves away, as it were, from the norm of prose intention as traditionally conceived, so he moves his novels more and more out of the realm in which they may be criticized from the prose point of view.¹

The words and imagery of Hardy are precise and scrupulously accurate. Hardy's insight into the human psyche, and regard for minuteness and for the overall pattern often remind us of Hopkins. The great poetic scenes of his novels compose the design of his underlying poetry. Hardy's basic appeal to our elemental passions, his accuracy of imagery and word pictures, and above all his authentic vision create a translucent poetic atmosphere in his novels, which possess a unique dignity and beauty about them.

In the 20th century, we find Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence writing poetic fiction in a way developed and enriched by Virginia Woolf. Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage deals basically with Miriam Henderson's sensibility, living from day to day, experiencing and reacting to the stimuli of the outside world of people and things. There are many poetic passages which

¹ Walter Allen, The English Novel, p. 253.

artistically and effectively describe Miriam Henderson's stream of consciousness. However, in Virginia Woolf we find a refined and more delicate treatment of this method.

In James Joyce's fiction, an emphasis on a direct rendering of the human consciousness in all its aspects is curiously mingled with the internal monologue technique and objective narrative. He renders his scenes and characters in a variety of ways so as to release the unconscious from personality. He achieves this end through the traditional means of the poetic cadence, metaphor, apostrophe and verbal variations on sound, etc.¹ He tries primarily to give us auditory impressions rather than complete visual descriptions. Joyce builds and manipulates words, and imparts a poetic quality to his descriptions by the clever use of rhymes, half-rhymes, inventions, anagrams, and every kind of associative device. He allows the physical impact of the word to pile up which makes his rhetoric uniquely rich. His experiment with language gives a poetic depth to his novels,² and it is further enhanced by his theory of epiphany, propounded in Stephen

1 Sisir Chatterjee, Problems in Modern English Fiction (Calcutta: Bookland Private Ltd., 1965), p. 78.

2 Arnold Kettle, "The consistency of James Joyce", The New Pelican Guide, Vol. 7, p. 388.

Hero¹, and used consistently in his later fiction. From the simple and poetic stories of Dubliners to the near-mystic and polyphonic Sinnerman Wake, he supremely renders the very feel and texture of life in an inherently poetic way. Though Joyce's technique is different from Virginia Woolf's, yet his novels certainly possess inner patterns of poetic rhythm.

Though in his creative impulse F. H. Lawrence is just the opposite of James Joyce, his art is essentially suggestive and poetic. His poetry is not simply an embellishment of emotions; it emanates from the fullness and constancy of his intuition, and from an intense apprehension of the unity of life.¹ We are brought in immediate and intimate contact with his characters through the sheer urgency of his writings. He captures the moment of life itself, both in human psychology and in non-human world. He penetrates through the surface gestures and feelings to delve deep into the human psyche, and to register and evoke life and manners with authentic vividness. His poetic genius manifests itself, as F. R. Leavis

1. "....By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany...." (James Joyce, Stephen Hero, [Cape Edition] 1944, p. 188).

2 F. R. Leavis, F. H. Lawrence : Novelist (Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), pp. 116-17.

asserts, in the intensity, constancy and fullness of the intuition.¹ His novels are alive with his naive, lyrical vision of the unity of life. In fact, he is earnestly and prophetically poetic in his prose narratives.

In all these masters of fiction we unmistakably see the poetic mode of fictional writing—an attempt to express through prose narratives what has so far been expressed only through poetry. But the idea of the poetic novel fully culminates in the writings of Virginia Woolf. Even in her first novel, The Voyage Out, there is a marked liquidity of style. With this novel she has started to look at people from unconventional angles. In her later novels, particularly in Jacob's Room and Mrs. Dalloway, she mingles the "splash" effect of a painter with saturated and suggestive poetic undercurrents.

From Virginia Woolf's essays and letters we can easily deduce her concept of the novel as a genre, which in practice blossoms in the form of her grand poetic novels. Throughout her literary career as a novelist and critic spreading well over three decades, Virginia Woolf was preoccupied with the nature, scope and form of the novel. As early as 1908, she wrote to Clive Bell about her desire to "reform the novel and capture multitudes

¹ E. R. Leavis, E. M. Lawrence : Novelist (Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), p. 121.

of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shapes."¹

According to Virginia Woolf, the novel is an excessively flexible genre, which can include all types of subject-matters. If a writer is truthfully representing his vision, without any compromise, "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss."² No theme is good or bad in itself -- the author's integrity, vision and other qualities decide the question, and authenticate the novel as an art-form.

The idea of the novel as poem depends on a view of poetry and poetic or imaginative experience that begins with Coleridge -- an ordering through language of expressions so desperate, and even opposite, in their nature that they seem to the reader to compose a whole.³ Virginia Woolf presents the novel as a poetic rendering of life. There are many hints in her essays as to what she means by 'poetry' in the novel.⁴ Though she has

1 The Flight of the Mind : The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. I, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London : The Hogarth Press, 1975), p. 356.

2 The Common Reader, First Series (London : The Hogarth Press, 1962), pp. 194-95.

3 Reuben A. Brewer, "The Novel as Poem" The Interpretation of Narrative Theory and Practice, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 235.

4 Ibid., p. 242.

clearly stated that prose, and not poetry, can best express the discord and the complexity of human life,¹ she affirms that the novel should be inseparable from poetry:

Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry - by which I mean saturated? Is that not my grudge against novelists? that they select nothing? The poets succeeding by simplifying : practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in : yet to saturate.²

According to Virginia Woolf, the novel should be neither a prose-poem, nor a verse-novel, but a combination of the best of prose and poetry -- prose saturated with poetry. The poetic atmosphere in a novel can be evoked by the intensity of moods and situations, by a persuasive mood, by the use of symbol and metaphor, by the use of creative language, and by a poetic vision of the whole on the part of the author. In her essay, "Phases of Fiction", she illustrates her point of view by quoting from Wuthering Heights, War and Peace and Moby Dick.

What Virginia Woolf advocates can be described as the poetic novel. She points out that Sterne has written this type of the novel. By swiftly passing from one emotion to another and by ignoring the orderly sequence of the story, he achieves the suggestiveness of the poetic

1 "The Narrow Bridge of Art", Collected Essays, Vol. II, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Chatto and Windus, 1972), p. 226.

2 A Writer's Diary, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Triad Grafton Books, 1985), p. 138.

medium. The poetic novel can attain perfection when it combines the compactness and the wide sweep of drama with the intensity of poetry. Such a poetic novel has "the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotions bred in us by crowds ----, the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine."¹ Her novels are full of rich visual and auditory images. She transforms the sights, sounds and echoes of the natural scenery into a poetic experience for the reader. Her language and style are deeply poetic. But often the poetry rises out of the situation, presented symbolically in the form of brief prose-poems.

Virginia Woolf holds that the author's integrity authenticates the novel and its meaning. By integrity she means the conviction which the author gives one that this is truth.² The author himself and his emotions should be completely depersonalized. A good novelist, by the integrity of his perception, projects his views into immortal characters. For example, Tolstoy does not remain himself; he becomes Pierre, Natasha, Anna and Levin.³ A

1 "The Harrow Bridge of Art", Collected Essays, Vol. II, p. 229.

2 A Room of One's Own (London : Triad/Panther Books, 1977), p. 69.

3 "George Moore", Collected Essays, Vol. I, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 338.

novelist's belief in himself enables him to create his work honestly and confidently. The novelist should artistically treat the basic human values since the true end of the novel is to portray human life in its true light.

Virginia Woolf thinks that a novel, in order to be a great art-form, should deal with the purer truth of life, the "greater abstractions" -- the wonderful intense life of the mind, which is closely related to all the ideas and feelings in general. The relation of the novel to life is very deep and intimate. Unlike the painter and the musician, the novelist can never forget that the subject-matter of his creative work is life. The novelist is always being "stimulated and played upon by the subject-matter of his art."¹ But he cannot recreate life exactly as it is, even though he strives to portray life realistically. Like the Romantics and the Post-Expressionists, Virginia Woolf rejects the photographic representation of life and offers a fresh conception of life. She also asserts that it is by observing, and not by imitating, the ordinary day-to-day life that the writer can grasp and convey the substance of reality.²

¹ Granite and Rainbow (London : The Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 41.

² "Phases of Fiction" Collected Essays, Vol. II, p. 64.

Virginia Woolf constantly underlines the extreme complexity of human life. The novel should, therefore, record not only the external world, but also the inner life. She eulogizes the Russian novel again and again because it concentrates upon human life in "all its width and depth, with every shade of feeling and subtlety of thought."¹ However, she points out that the artist must preserve a balance between the inner and outer worlds. He must present a fusion of both the aspects of reality "...to put practically everything in; yet to saturate."² She believes that the writer should aim at, and succeed in, presenting the different levels of reality and achieving a combination of them.

In spite of her belief that "life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged", she, like a poet, admits the aesthetic significance of form and order in a work of art. The novelist continually searches for a suitable and significant form. The visible chaos of human life is to be cast in an aesthetically meaningful shape, for only then a work of art can truly represent the artist's vision of life. An artist should achieve a fusion and balance of life and art to convey his interpretation of

¹ "On Re-reading Meredith", Collected Essays, Vol. I, p. 233.

² A Writer's Diary, p. 136.

life meaningfully. In her essay on Montaigne, she remarks, "nothing matters except life and, of course, order."¹

Virginia Woolf assigns a poetic form to the novel. As early as 1916, a year after the publication of her first novel The Voyage Out, she wrote to Lytton Strachey that in this novel she wanted :

...to give the feeling of a vast tumult of life, as various and disorderly as possible, which should be cut short for a moment by the death, and go on again -- and the whole was to have a sort of pattern, and be somehow controlled.²

By the poetic form of the novel, Virginia Woolf implies, besides other things, the systematization of, and right relationship between, the emotions explored and communicated in a book. To achieve this inner form, the writer has to acquire a command of the fictional technique, and the reader has to possess the ability to grasp it. She admires Turgenev for his symmetry and balance -- an inner form, which he gives by "a succession of emotions radiating from some character at the centre."³ She admits in her diary that she wanted "to discuss Form, having been

1 The Common Reader, First Series, p. 91.

2 Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey : Letters, ed. Leonard Woolf and James Strachey (London : The Hogarth Press, 1956), p. 57.

3 "The Novels of Turgenev", Collected Essays, Vol. I, p. 251.

reading Turgenev."¹ On the other hand, she criticizes Dostoyevsky for the loose and unsatisfactory form of his novels, while in Turgenev the emotional symmetry imparts a profundity to thoughts and feelings. Virginia Woolf's novels are internally stitched through their emotional intensity which gives a poetic mode to her prose narratives.

Besides the presentation of emotions in right order, and in right relationship to one another, the form of the novel also depends on a central point or "central line" which is a unifying force in a book. This idea of Virginia Woolf's has a close affinity with Henry James's concept of "commanding centre." As a novelist Virginia Woolf is constantly aware of presenting a pattern of life, which should be "somehow controlled."² All her novels, therefore, have an inner logic and coherence.

Virginia Woolf consciously stresses the significance of symbols as it gives the suggestivity of poetry to the novel. A writer, in her opinion, consciously or unconsciously finds out symbols which, besides being artistically significant and pleasing, convey the author's ideas effectively. According to her, a symbol should be one single whole which should suggest and evoke the author's ideas, impressions or feelings boldly to the reader. Speaking of the basic function of symbols, she observes;

¹ A Writer's Diary, pp. 203-4.

² Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey : Letters, p. 57.

What interests me most in the last stage is the freedom and boldness with which my imagination picked up, used and tossed aside all the images, symbols which I had prepared. I am sure that this is the right way of using them -- not in set pieces as I had tried first, coherently, but simply as images never making them work out; only suggest.¹

Virginia Woolf believes in inventing new symbols to suggest rationally the inexpressible element of human psyche that makes a work of art highly poetic. While discussing the three great Greek dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, she admires Aeschylus's 'symbolic power' which he is able to achieve by making symbols add to the value of what they symbolize. She remarks in her essay "On Not Knowing Greek":

By the bold and running use of metaphor he will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection which, taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge and make splendid.²

Virginia Woolf points to the repetitive devices for gaining an enriched symbolic meaning. In a poetic novel, the author often uses atmosphere, action and character in a symbolic manner. In her essays, "Jane Eyre" and "Lathering Heights", she holds that a writer needs symbols to express himself fully when he finds

¹ A Writer's Diary, p. 166.

² Collected Essays, Vol. I, pp. 7-8.

words inadequate to give vent to his feelings and impressions. Apropos of this, she writes in her essay, "On Being Ill":

We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, rather instinctively this, that, and the other -- a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause -- which the poet, knowing words to be meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his pages to evoke, when collected, a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain.¹

In her article, "The Novels of Thomas Hardy", Virginia Woolf brings out Hardy's poetic power of imparting symbolic value to his characters. His characters are governed by their elemental passions, but "they have -- and this is the poet's gift -- something symbolical about them...."² Similarly, she thinks that the characters of George Meredith symbolise ideas and passions, and thus grow larger than what they obviously appear to be. She says: "He is among the poets who identify the character with the passion or with the idea; who symbolise and make abstract."³ An extract from Virginia Woolf's essay, "De Quincey's Autobiography", is also worth quoting for her views on symbolism and repetitive devices as integral elements of the poetic novel:

1 The Moment and Other Essays (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950), p. 21.

2 Collected Essays, Vol. I, p. 261.

3 Ibid., p. 229.

If we try to analyse our sensations we shall find that we are worked upon as if by music -- the senses are stirred rather than the brain. The rise and fall of the sentence immediately soothes us to a mood and removes us to a distance in which the near fades and detail is extinguished.... (The emotion is) brought slowly by repeated images before us until it stays, in all its complexity, complete.†

To propound her own theory of the poetic novel, Virginia Woolf rejects the traditional concepts of plot and story. She is convinced that the writer should communicate his vision of life through a pattern of thoughts and emotions, and not through a chronological sequence of events, based on a well - delineated design. To portray the psychological reality of human beings, she has to resort to a 'poetic approach' towards plot in the novel.

To embody her impressions in a poetic mode, the novelist also has to remould the resources of language in a creative manner. She is also aware that words, being powerful and suggestive, are naturally saturated with associations and memories. In one of her broadcasts entitled "Craftsmanship", she emphasizes the importance of words and style:

Such is the suggestive power of words that they will often make a bad book into a very lovable human being, and a good book into a man whom we can hardly tolerate in the room. Even words that are hundreds of years old have this power...."2

1 The Common Reader, Second Series (London : The Hogarth Press, 1962), pp. 133-34.

2 "Craftsmanship", Collected Essays, Vol. II, p. 248.

As a novelist, she evolves a form of prose capable of expressing the variegated moods and thoughts of her characters. She is very careful about the proper use of words to convey the emotions and thoughts of a person as effectively as possible. Virginia Woolf thinks that good style comes to a novelist as naturally as rhythm to a poet, provided he has an intense emotion and a consistent vision to express. She admires the rhythmic and powerful prose of Conrad. A good prose-style thus necessarily contains the virtues of good poetry. In her letter to Vita Sackville-West, she remarks :

Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words.... Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit in; and is writing One has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it....¹

In short, Virginia Woolf has lucidly expressed her views about the poetic novel. Her creed of the poetic novel is basically an expression of her aesthetic personality. She has not only theorized, but has also put her concept into practice. Her novels are a glaring exposition and illustration of her concept of the poetic novel, which

¹ A Change of Perspective : The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London : The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 247.

will be evident from the discussion of her novels in the forthcoming chapters. In fact, her theory and practice of the poetic novel is her most significant contribution to the novel, perhaps the most popular and meaningful literary genre in the present age. No wonder, E. M. Forster asserts that Virginia Woolf's problem is that she is essentially a poet, and not a novelist, and wants to create something as near to a novel as possible.¹

¹ E. M. Forster, "Virginia Woolf", Two Cheers for Democracy (Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 256-57.

Chapter II
The Early Novels

I The Voyage Out

Published in 1915, The Voyage Out is the first novel of Virginia Woolf. Nevertheless, it marks the beginning of her poetic mode of fictional writing. Though apparently written in the tradition of the English novel, with contrived plot, cleverly thought out developments and well-delineated characters, the hidden, underlying poetic strain which permeates the later novels like The Waves, To the Lighthouse, etc., also becomes gradually evident as we go through the novel. The immediacy of situations, the intensity of emotions, the evocative language, the suggestive use of symbols and metaphors, and above all, the mood behind the chronological development of the story, make this novel abundantly poetic.

The novel is replete with fine and delicate word-pictures, which often present a psychological state of mind with a poetic intensity. The following passage fully illustrates it :

...the only thing she had seen, since she stood there, was a circular iridescent patch slowly floating past with a straw in the middle of it. The straw and the patch swam again and again behind the tremulous medium of a great weeping tear, and the tear rose and fell and dropped into the river.¹

¹ The Voyage Out (London : Granada Publishing Ltd., 1982), p. 6.

Here Virginia Woolf creates the right atmosphere, while laying bare the foundations of Mrs. Ambrose's character. The world is figuratively seen as a straw and as a patch from behind a tear. The repetition of this image underlines her agony of parting with her children and her familiar world. The minute analysis of her psychology is rendered in phrases loosely strung together. The loose sentence structure gives a sharp ring to her emotions. The choice of words and the immediacy of presentation imparts a poetic depth to the description. The image of the tear also occurs in the opening passages of Jacob's Room. Similarly, on another occasion, people boarding the Euphrosyne tend to be more cordial after the relaxation of the storm. Their feeling is described in a poetic manner, as also their re-adjustment in the normal routine:

They looked, and beheld a complete yellow circle of sun; next minute it was traversed by sailing strands of cloud, and then completely hidden. By breakfast the next morning, however, the sky was swept clean, the waves, although steep, were blue, and after their view of the strange underworld, inhabited by phantoms, people began to live among tea-pots and loaves of bread with greater zest than ever.¹

The above quoted passage is highly poetic in its figurative presentation of emotions. The sentences move rhythmically. The concluding sentence is rather a rambling series of

¹ The Waves Out, p. 69.

expressions with a minimum of finite verbs. It creates a resonant atmosphere adding a unique poetic dimension to the passage.

Likewise, Rachel's reactions after her experience with Halloway can be quoted in this connection:

...the physical pain of the emotion was so great that she could only keep herself moving above the great leaps of her heart. She leant upon the rail of the ship, and gradually ceased to feel, for a chill of body and mind crept over her. Far out between the waves little black and white sea-birds were riding. Rising and falling with smooth and graceful movements in the hollows of the waves they seemed singularly detached and unconcerned.¹

The short matter-of-fact phrases fully express Rachel's bewildered state of mind without any affectation or mannerism. The easy and quiet style is full of sympathy and understanding. The restrained tones of the language give a poignant depth to Rachel's feelings. The image of the two sea-birds unconcerned with Rachel's feelings, absorbed in their own game, gracefully rising and falling with the waves, accentuate the initial loneliness of human beings in facing the heightened emotion.

The novel basically deals with Rachel's quest for organic development of personality. The conception is delineated with a basic awareness of the ambiguity of this process and the complexity and contradictory aspects

¹ The Voyage Out, p. 73.

of the development of aesthetic thought. Virginia Woolf has successfully endeavoured to transmit the reality of Rachel's consciousness to a fabric of beautiful prose and sensitive poetry. In this process various emotional states of Rachel's mind are presented with poetic sensibility. For instance:

The morning was hot, and the exercise of reading left her mind contracting and expanding like the mainspring of a clock. The sounds in the garden outside joined with the clock, and the small noises of midday, which one can ascribe to no definite cause, in a regular rhythm. It was all very real, very big, very impersonal, and after a moment or two she began to raise her first finger and to let it fall on the arm of her chair so as to bring back to herself some consciousness of her own existence.¹

The mechanical strain of reading without enjoyment and the regular rhythmic sounds of the day lull the brain to a type of hypnotized trance, from which Rachel tries to wake herself. But the unconscious world is too strong to resist: "The things that existed were so immense and so desolate... She continued to be conscious of these vast masses of substance for a long stretch of time, the clock still ticking in the midst of the universal silence."² Such minute apprehension of psychological crisis in the process of an inward voyage like that of Ulysses gives a poetic depth to Virginia Woolf's prose. In passages dealing with human emotions and psychic reactions,

1 The Voyage Out, p. 124.

2 Ibid.

Virginia Woolf becomes overtly poetic. We can closely examine the passages in detail, word by word like a lyric poem, imparting a poetic fullness to the novel's meaning and design. In her novels the characters often explore their own mind in its creative relationship with the non-human universe, and this, too, creates a distinct poetic atmosphere. For instance:

Even while they had been saying commonplace things Susan had been conscious of the excitement of intimacy, which seemed not only to lay bare something in her, but in the trees and the sky, and the progress of his speech which seemed inevitable was positively painful to her, for no human being had ever come so close to her before.¹

In her heightened emotion, Susan feels a particular affinity with nature and is ready to share her joy with trees and sky. This Wordsworthian affinity with nature imparts a poetic suggestivity and tenderness to the passage. Like Wordsworth, Virginia Woolf is also aware of a spiritual unity between man and nature which enables man to share his emotions with the natural background in which he has been placed by life. The consciousness of a persisting life in nature is presented through many passages, such as the following one:

It was an ordinary tree, but to her it appeared so strange that it might have been the only tree in the world. Dark was the trunk in the middle, and the branches sprang here and there, leaving jagged intervals of light between them as distinctly as if it had but that second risen

1 The Voyage Out, p. 137.

from the ground. Having seen a sight that would last her for a lifetime, and for a lifetime would preserve that second, the tree once more sank into the ordinary ranks of trees, and she was able to seat herself in its shade and to pick the red flowers with the thin green leaves which were growing beneath it.¹

The mysterious undertone given to the description of tree reminds us of Coleridge. The tree here becomes a symbol of eternity and life, heightening and clarifying the pensive mood of Rachel. The long sentences consisting of smaller units provide an appropriate background to the symbol. However, gradually the tree loses its magnitude and Rachel is able to relax under its shade and interpret her feelings. The mystic approach adds to the suggestivity of the passage.

The very theme of the novel is poetic. Rachel, like Ulysses, goes on a Voyage to search for her reality. It is a psychological voyage into dreams and the subconscious; but it is also an exploration of the world outside the European culture, stimulated by a dissatisfaction with the enormous accumulations of carved stone, sustained glass and rich brown paintings which they offer to the tourist. The people on board the Euphrosyne leave behind the stagnant, restrictive social world. As the ship moves along the Thames, it leaves London, "sitting on its mud."² The city of "shooting motor cars, more like spiders in

¹ The Voyage Out, p. 174.

² Ibid., p. 23.

the moon than terrestrial objects, the thundering drays, the jingling hansom, and little black broughams."¹ London shrinks to two lines of building on either side of the passengers. As they steadily move down the river, London looks like a "swarm of lights with a pale yellow canopy drooping above it."² Yet the social definitions are not forgotten. The description of the Falloways never extends beyond their social selves. Rooms are always used by Virginia Woolf as an extension of a personality, and Mrs. Falloway's cabin on the ship immediately becomes the room of a lady of fashion. She appears in the guise of a painting (she is like an 18th century masterpiece) and sees things as paintings (she declares that the hills, from the ship, look just like Whistler).⁴ In Mrs. Falloway's view, the social reality is the most profound reality, and therefore her presence destroys Rachel's musical world.

The underlying poetry of The Voyage Out points the way to Virginia Woolf's future development. But the fundamental poetry in this novel remains somehow unconnected, though from this novel her interest in the workings of the mind is accompanied by a sense of reverence, a recognition of the natural dignity of each man and a recognition of the mind as a creative power,

1 The Voyage Out, p. 7.

2 Ibid., p. 13.

3 Ibid., p. 36.

and hence mysterious. Her sensitivity results in the grand poetic passages which dominate her novels. By their concrete visual imagery some passages achieve the effect of painting. As for example,

Save for a thread of water at the bottom, the river was merely a deep channel of dry yellow stones. On the bank grew those trees which Helen had said it was worth the voyage out merely to see. April had burst their buds, and they bore large blossoms among their glossy green leaves with petals of a thick wax-like substance coloured an exquisite cream or pink or deep crimson. But filled with one of those unreasonable exultations which start generally from an unknown cause, and sweep whole countries and skies into their embrace, she walked without seeing. The night was encroaching upon the day. Her ears hummed with the tunes she had played the night before; she sang, and the singing made her walk faster and faster. She did not see distinctly where she was going, the trees and the landscape appearing only as masses of green and blue, with an occasional space of differently coloured sky.¹

The whole passage is remarkable for its beautiful presentation of the landscape and the corresponding mental state of Rachel. The plastic use of colour in phrases like "dry yellow stones", "glossy green leaves", "exquisite cream or pink", "deep crimson", "masses of green and blue", etc., imparts vivacity to the passage. The detailed description of the surrounding scenery provides a fitting background to the bewildered and tense mood of Rachel, which by contrast becomes more poignant. Such an analysis imparts a poetic depth to the description.

¹ The Voyage Out, p. 173.

Virginia Woolf's deep penetration into the basic fabric of human psyche creates a sensitive aroma around her characters. Rachel considers her love for Terence as something poignantly super-human. But even in her elation she is aware of the transitory nature of her sense of fulfillment:

Aimless, trivial, meaningless, oh no - what she had seen at tea made it impossible for her to believe that. The little jokes, the chatter, the inanities of the afternoon had shrivelled up before her eyes. Underneath the likings and spites, the coming together and partings, great things were happening - terrible things, because they were so great. Her sense of safety was shaken, as if beneath twigs and dead leaves she had seen the movement of a snake. It seemed to her that a moment's respite was allowed, a moment's make - believe, and then again the profound and reasonless law asserted itself, moulding them all to its liking, making and destroying.¹

The almost whimsical rambling of mental process reminds us of Hardy's novels. Rachel is aware that behind the facade of day-to-day routine something greater is taking place according to which their lives shall be shaped; yet their lives and the greater designs are not directly related with each other. The profound shaping forces are irrational. Her sense of unreality and apprehension is clarified by the image of the lurking snake. Virginia Woolf's poetic mode of apprehension clearly presents the ambiguities, fears and doubts of Rachel's mind.

¹ The Voyage Out, p. 269.

Virginia Woolf uses symbols and images almost like a mystic poet to suggest aesthetically, and give insight into the ineffable in human thought and feeling, to heighten and make splendid the desired emotions, and to analyze the idea. The voyage from London to Santa Marina, besides being a physical voyage out for Rachel, First, Hewet, and Susan, is a voyage out into the world of love and adventure. For First, it is a voyage out "to settle the matter,"¹ whether he is going to the bar or to Cambridge; for Susan it is a voyage out from "the long solitude of an old maid's life"² into the world of romance and marriage; and for Rachel, who has lived a secluded life under the protection of old aunts, it is a voyage out into the world of experience and comprehension of life. Rachel's going out from the misty and cold London to the dazzling, sparkling heat of south America symbolizes her growing from her cool and unsensuous girlhood to warm and sensuous maidenhood. She is, as Helen thinks, "an unlicked girl"³ with a "hesitation in speaking, or rather a tendency to use the wrong words" which "made her seem more than normally incompetent for her years".⁴ This

1 The Voyage Out, p. 189.

2 Ibid., p. 162.

3 Ibid., p. 18.

4 Ibid., pp. 14-15.

innocent and ignorant girl, who at the age of twenty four scarcely knows "that men desired women",¹ becomes conscious of life and love when she first experiences Balloway's kiss and then Hewet's love for her. This voyage out poetically becomes a symbol of Rachel's growing and going out into the world, of her facing life as it is.

The image of the river is central to the novel, as it is in Twain's Huckleberry Finn. It almost becomes a refrain for comparisons and contrasts. The image also confirms the identification of "the voyage out" with Rachel's inward voyage. The image adds to the poetic charm of the novel. It is during a river journey that she realises her love for Hewet and contracts the disease that eventually kills her, thus completing her isolation. Moreover, as she discovers her more profound self, her simple perceptions have the distinctive combination of passivity and movement associated with a flowing river. Sitting among the guests of the Santa Marina hotel, she "seemed to see and hear a little of everything, much as a river feels the twigs that fall into it and sees the sky above."² Her reception of external impressions is merely a passive reflection of objects. Throughout the novel there is a sense that something is happening to the characters, that in embarking on their adventure they are

¹ The Voyage Out, p. 90.

² Ibid., pp. 266-67.

relinquishing whatever power they might have to determine their behaviour. The vagueness of passive perception makes her descriptions more profound than clear thought, enhancing the beauty of the novel's underlying poetry.

The repetition of the river image gradually gains in associations and hints at the use of repetitive devices in Virginia Woolf's later prose narratives. Mrs. Ambrose compares Rachel's mood, in the first stages of her love for Hewet, to the sliding of a river "quicker, quicker still, as it races to a waterfall."¹ The excitement Rachel feels while confronted with that danger emerges clearly when she is engaged to Terence Hewet. He tells her that he enjoys being hostile to her, because she then looks at him as though she would throw him into the sea:

To be flung into the sea, to be washed hither and thither, and driven about the roots of the world - the idea was incoherently delightful.... He caught her in his arms as she passed him, and they fought for mastery, imagining a rock, and the sea heaving beneath them.... 'I'm a mermaid! I can swim,' she cried, 'so the game's up.'²

It is poetically suggested that the ability to swim, which will free Rachel from her lover's grip, will also free her from life. Her love itself presents her with this challenge. When she and Terence declare their

1 The Voyage Out, p. 227.

2 Ibid., p. 305.

love for each other, Rachel murmurs "Terrible, terrible", thinking as much of the persistent churning of waters as of her own feelings.¹ There is no possible reconciliation between the awareness of a self and the reality extending conventional boundaries -- this is what Rachel's love offers her -- and the control necessary to live within the society.

The images of the sea and the waves have always been related in Virginia Woolf's novels with a "general sense of the poetry of existence"² that overcomes one. In The Voyage Out also the clever use of these images imparts a poetic delicacy to the descriptive passages. For instance:

In the intervals when no one spoke, they heard far off the low murmur of the sea, as the waves quietly broke and spread the beach with a film of water, and withdrew to break again. The cool green light fell through the leaves of the tree, and there were soft crescents and diamonds of sunshine upon the plates and the tablecloth.³

The melodious sound-rhythms lend poetry to the description of the scene which can be compared with some of the highly poetic passages in The Waves. The exact visual imagery achieves the effect of a painting edifying the

1 The Voyage Out, pp. 271-72.

2 A Writer's Diary (London : Triad Crafts, 1985), p. 62.

3 The Voyage Out, p. 329.

suggestive melody of the passage. This rhythmic poetry can also be seen in the portrayal of the non-rational part of mental activity seen especially in dreams, or in the mind fevered by excessive emotion or disease.

Virginia Woolf presents the grotesque side of physical life in general by the figurative use of animal imagery. In The Years, she employs it to make disparaging descriptions and to reduce the dignity of human interest and impulse. The use of animal imagery in The Voyage Out is functional and poetic. Mr. Pepper, "The little man" with "sinister conscience" is a vivacious and malicious old ape," "a fossilised fish", an "ill-conditioned fox-terrier", "a cormorant" and a "cow".¹ At the beginning of the hotel dance the diningroom" had a certain fantastic resemblance to a farmyard scattered with rain on which bright pigeons kept descending."² When the music begins the people are like rats following the piper, and a passing woman looks, as she dances, like a pig. When the mail arrives, the guests of the hotel are like animals being fed.

Like Conrad's Heart of Darkness, the power of The Voyage Out resides largely in the inescapability of the dark primitive world. The isolating force of the

¹ The Voyage Out, pp. 8, 9, 11, 13, 52 and 99.

² Ibid., p. 150.

atmosphere has its own logic, and the characters lose their grip on the meaning of the other clearer world. Yet the hotel in Santa Marina shows that the London the Euphrosyne had left "sitting on its mud" is still with them with all its ensuing pettiness and boredom. The clock and the newspapers -- both are symbols of the public, impersonal reality -- dominate the hotel sitting-room.

The emphasis on the inner world, however, is unbalanced by the way in which the external world functions as a symbol of mental state and emotion. In this novel Virginia Woolf uses the more conventional means of correlating an event with a psychological state or quality; the correlation is the author's, and not the character's, though in her later works she creates symbols from the external world by means of her characters' response to objects and situations in the world. When Rachel feels the unsatisfactory company of the hotel guests, she sees a kitchen-worker beheading a chicken "with an expression of vindictive energy and triumph combined."¹ Here, the external occurrence is already fully developed; Rachel's response adds nothing to it. Much of the external world is little more than a "literary" and poetic counterpart of a character's state of mind.

¹ The Voyage Out, p. 252.

Another factor which is developed as a poetic device in the novel is Virginia Woolf's substitution of a kind of spatial unity for an ordered pattern of action unfolding in time. The spatial effects in this novel have the clear psychological function of illustrating the broadening of Rachel's mind. For example, putting civilisation in perspective, Rachel remarks:

'Towns are very small', Rachel remarked, obscuring the whole of Santa Marina and its suburbs with one hand. The sea filled in all the angles of the coast smoothly, breaking in a white frill, and here and there ships were set firmly in the blue.¹

This symbol of the large in the small is repeated again when Helen Ambrose sees landscape in the fire.² This substitution of a group of symbols for the orderly working out of a motive or a set of motives constitutes the lyrical method of Virginia Woolf.³

Virginia Woolf always uses language in an evocative poetic manner, which is best exemplified in The Waves. But in The Voyage Out also we find many passages which can be treated as imagist poems in prose. The imaginative language and the rhythmic style result in a fragrant poetry which pervades passages after passages. For

1 The Voyage Out, p. 150.

2 Ibid., p. 110.

3 William Troy, 'Virginia Woolf : The Novel of Sensibility', Literary Opinion in America, ed. M.D. Zabel (New York : Harper and Row, 1962), p. 332.

example :

At night, indeed, when the waltzes were swinging in the saloon, and gifted passengers reciting, the little ship -- shrunk to a few beads of light out among the dark waves, and one high in air upon the mast-head - seemed something mysterious and impressive to heated partners resting from the dance. She became a ship passing in the night - an emblem of the loneliness of human life, an occasion for queer confidences and sudden appeals for sympathy.¹

The sight of ship, shrunk to "a few beads of light" among the dark waves, is extremely poetic. The matter-of-fact manner of this passage, and the parentheses accentuate the beauty of the scene. The visual image of the ship against the dark night provides a fitting background to the suggestions of the eternal loneliness of mankind. The small phrases build up a sonorous rhythm metaphorically presenting the basic needs of human life. Let us illustrate it further by quoting another passage:

Moving very slowly, and rearing absurdly high over each wave, the little boat was now approaching a white crescent of sand. Behind this was a deep green valley, with distinct hills on either side. On the slope of the right-hand hill white houses with brown roofs were settled, like nesting sea-birds, and at intervals cypresses striped the hill with black bars. Mountains whose sides were flushed with red, but whose crowns were bald, rose as a pinnacle, half-concealing another pinnacle behind it. The hour being still early, the whole view was exquisitely light and airy; the blues and greens of sky and tree were intense

¹ The Voyage Out, p. 85.

but not sultry. As they drew nearer and could distinguish details, the effect of the earth with its minute objects and colours and different forms of life was overwhelming after four weeks of the sea, and kept them silent.¹

The passage is remarkable for its poetic depiction of the landscape, plastic use of colour and the emotion of the voyagers on seeing the earth after four weeks. The categorical presentation of the landscape with a poet's eye for the minute details enchants us. The comparison of white houses with brown roofs with nesting sea-birds is apt and gives a vivacity to the landscape. The lavish use of colours, "deep green", "black bars", "blues and greens", "white crescent of sand", etc., impart a definite poetic touch to the description.

It is not only in the beautiful description of nature that Virginia Woolf's poetic fancy takes its full swing, but in pensive passages also the underlying sensitive poetry becomes obvious. The following few lines fully bring it out:

Why was it that relations between different people were so unsatisfactory, so fragmentary, so hazardous, and words so dangerous that the instinct to sympathize with another human being was an instinct to be examined carefully and probably crushed? What had Evelyn really wished to say to him?... The mystery of life and the unreality even of one's own sensations overcame him as he walked down the corridor which led to his room.²

1 The Voyage Out, p. 86.

2 Ibid., p. 194.

Virginia Woolf was basically concerned with human life and its emotions. Hewet is somewhat surprised at Evelyn's loneliness, but is sensitive enough to realize that it is fundamental and generic in its associations. Human interrelations are discordant, short-lived and hazardous. The life itself does not offer any occasion for sympathy and understanding. The image of Evelyn sitting alone in the empty hall with dimly lighted corridors accentuates this feeling of squalor. The figure of a woman that passes him also seems aloof and alien, further stressing the fundamental dilemma of human loneliness. The short sentences, containing sharp, small phrases, the flowing rhythms and the suppressed music can be compared with the style of the famous Chinese author Lu Hsun, who was a contemporary of Virginia Woolf. Like him, Virginia Woolf also uses psychology as an instrument to explore life's main problems. This attitude imparts a sympathetic suggestivity to her novels. Her poetry mainly arises from her sympathetic penetration into human emotions and their presentation in melodious and rhythmic language. The poetic apprehension of the mood is often coupled with beautiful visual effects which beautify the language, for example, "The sound spread through the chapel as the rings of water spread from a fallen stone."¹ Such beautiful and exact images impart a vivacity to the

¹ The Waves Out, p. 231.

description. The alliteration of "s" sounds also produces a musical effect. We can quote another example to make the point clear:

'Terrible - terrible,' she murmured after another pause, but in saying this she was thinking as much of the persistent churning of the water as of her own feeling. On and on it went in the distance, the senseless and cruel churning of the water.¹

The repetition of the image of the churning water beautifully and emphatically brings out the bewildered agony and ecstasy of Rachel in love. The long sentence in a way shows the continuence of her agony, and the evocative language gives a subtlety to the expression.

The scenes of Rachel's illness are also delineated with a poetic neatness and clarity. For example :

...having turned on her pillow Rachel woke to find herself in the midst of one of those interminable nights which do not end at twelve, but go on into the double figures - thirteen, fourteen, and so on until they reach the twenties, and then the thirties, and then the forties. She realized that there is nothing to prevent nights from doing this if they choose.²

Only a poet can describe such a variety of quickly changing emotions with such suggestivity and precision. Rachel's mental agony and delirium, her obsessions and incoherent vision are treated in utmost detail, but

1 The Voyage Out, p. 279.

2 Ibid., p. 337.

nowhere does Virginia Woolf lose her inherent charm. She is never explicit in such moments. The vagueness of passive perception makes the underlying poetry more profound. Rachel's death is not a Romanticist's solution according to which perfect love is realised in death. Rather, it is a denial of the possibility, even of the desire, to join one's deepest self with another's. In fact, the course which love has taken for Rachel leads her to see love as an assault; her image of love becomes horrible and aggressive. During her illness Terence kisses her, and Rachel opens her eyes, but she sees only an "old woman with the knife."¹ Terence's love has not brought Rachel into a larger world; it has confirmed the reality of her own sensibility, and her determination to cling to it. The people who try to speak to her during her illness are her "tormentors" and their faces fade from her consciousness in her attempt to focus on "the hot, red, quick sights which passed incessantly before her eyes."² The theme of Rachel's inward exploration has an undeniable power, though the exploration is largely negative. It offers a statement of the difficulty of integrating the deepest needs of self-expression and self-realisation with the life one must lead as a social being.

1 The Voyage Out, p. 340.

2 Ibid.

It demonstrates the disturbing confusion of the self's own needs and impulses, and of the her or contained in the fundamental inarticulate condition of that part of the mind from which attraction and revulsion arise. The inadequacy of language, and the pressure of an inarticulate sensibility are portrayed with a poetic refinement.

Like Dostoyevsky, Virginia Woolf helps us to grasp the limitations of the probability of ever fathoming human personality. Through her poetic method she clearly shows the chaotic and contradictory feelings, conveying at the same time a sense of something miraculous which keeps on attracting both our feelings and our minds, elevating them, enlarging them and enabling us to realize the life itself in its virtues, grandeur, inscrutability and transience. The poetic strain gradually shapes itself in the novel accordingly.

Though The Waves Out is the first novel of Virginia Woolf, it contains all the poetic qualities of her method, which are fully realized in her later works. Though this novel is often compared with the novels of Jane Austen, it clearly bears the imprint of Virginia Woolf's poetic mode of writing. The subjective associations without any logical consistency, the intensity of situations, the persuasive mood of the narrative, the sonorous language and an extensive use of images and metaphors create a resonant poetic atmosphere in the novel. In her later writing these devices are developed fully,

bringing the novel very close to poetry, as will be evident from the discussions in the forthcoming chapters of the present study.

II Night and Day

Published in 1919, Night and Day reveals Virginia Woolf the novelist; in it we can trace most of her experiments with theme and technique. Taken together, it is fairly rich in poetry. Like Turgenev, Virginia Woolf is a lyricist with a very poignant sensitivity. Her poetry lies between the lines, in the haunting overtones of her imagery, in her gift for metaphor, cadence and associations, in her evocative use of language, in her psychological apprehension of psyche and in her power of absorption and distillation.

In the descriptive passages of Night and Day, there is an emotional intensity and a disciplined freedom in the use of words and images which are usually associated with poetry. The following extract from the novel illustrates it:

The night was very still, and on such nights, when the traffic thins away, the walker becomes conscious of the moon in the street, as if the curtains of the sky had been drawn apart, and the heaven lay bare, as it does in the country. The air was softly cool, so that people who had been sitting talking in a crowd found it pleasant to walk a little before deciding to stop an omnibus or encounter light again in an underground railway.¹

The restrained language is used to present a background against which the displayed emotions gain in intensity.

¹ Night and Day (London : Granada Publishing Ltd., 1982), p. 57.

The image of the "curtain of the sky" comes suddenly and startles us with a recognition of the sheer lunar beauty which can best be seen in the open country. The awareness of this harmonious beauty also creates a reluctance in the people to go back to their normal life. The beauty of the night sky makes the moment suddenly mysterious and significant and in it the emotional decisions of greater significance can be taken:

They stood silent for a few moments while the river shifted in its bed, and the silver and red lights which were laid upon it were torn by the current and joined together again. Very far off up the river a steamer hooted with its hollow voice of unspeakable melancholy, as if from the heart of lonely mist-shrouded voyagings.¹

The silhouetted figures of Rodney and Katharine peer down into the river, conscious of each other's emotions, and silently brooding over life. The continuous flow of the river with its shimmering lights constitutes an appropriate atmosphere for their mood. The beauty and the melancholy of the hooting steamer "from the heart of lonely mist-shrouded voyagings" figuratively depicts the psychological crisis of Katharine's alienation. Such an apprehension of the mood and its symbolic presentation constitutes the underlying poetry of the novel. Like a poet, she is easily satisfied with the evidence of the senses alone.

¹ Night and Day, p. 59.

Virginia Woolf delves deep into the psychological build-up of her characters, and presents them with a poetic depth and accuracy:

She was much disappointed in her mother and in herself too. The little tug which she gave to the blind, letting it fly up to the top with a snap, signified her annoyance. She was very angry, and yet impotent to give expression to her anger, or know with whom she was angry. How they talked and moralised and made up stories to suit their own version of the becoming, and secretly praised their own devotion and tact! No; they had their duelling in a mist, she decided; hundreds of miles away - away from what?!

The Laingian motif of the suppressed hostility between the world of "self" and the world of "them" can be seen in Katharine's monologue. The passage exquisitely sums up one of the main themes of the novel, i.e., the clash between the person society expects and believes one to be, and the scope of that self one most values. Katharine's personality has no simple, social means of expression; the little tug which she gives to the blind is the only expression of protest in which she can indulge. From the collective futile behaviour she wants to escape into her private world, which is not clearly known to her. She is a generic social misfit, who is developed later as typical neurotic misfit in the works of Tom Stoppard, David Storey, Peter Nicholas and John Wain in the sixties. Virginia Woolf's basic need to express everything related

1 Night and Day, p. 110.

to human emotions compels her to envisage the poetic technique of presentation in her novels.

The division between self and society is also implicit in the character of Ralph Penham, who, in many ways, bears resemblance to the childish, vain man in Virginia Woolf's later fiction. His attitude towards his family, work, and even towards love for Katharine has a recalcitrant element of fantasy. However, he possesses a poetic refinement which enables him to look past character and ideals to see the nothingness, the emptiness at the heart of life which is Virginia Woolf's most consistent vision :

'In what one can trust, then?' he thought, as he leant there. So feeble and insubstantial did he feel himself that he repeated the word aloud.

'In what can one trust? Not in men and women. Not in one's dreams about them. There's nothing -- nothing, nothing left at all.'¹

We see here a hint of the repeated "nothing" which is to haunt the rest of Virginia Woolf's work. It becomes almost a refrain, reminding us of Heinlein's stories. It can be seen in many other passages also. For example,

All things had turned to ghosts; the whole mass of the world was insubstantial vapour, surrounding the solitary spark in his mind whose burning point he could remember, for it burnt no more. He had once cherished a belief, and Katharine had embodied this belief, and she did so no longer. He did not blame her; he blamed nothing, nobody; he saw the truth. He saw the dun-coloured race of waters and the blank shore.²

1 Night and Day, p. 142.

2 Ibid.

The misty, vaporous indistinctness of this passage arises from a poetic apprehension of the mood. A vision of the insubstantial nature of our world and life is reinforced and symbolized, as in Conrad, by a visual impressionism, where there are no hard outlines, and where the nature of reality depends on the point of view, or the quality of the light. It is the poetic quality of the whole that makes Denham's situation and emotional outburst credible. But it is the beginning of an attempt, and we must turn to Virginia Woolf's later novels for the full use of it.

We have some beautiful passages in the novel, which read like blank verse, without formal division. For instance, the following lines can be quoted:

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But it was a dark night and the water was barely visible. Cabs were passing, and couples were loitering slowly along the road, keeping as close to the railings as possible, though the trees had as yet no leaves to cast shadow upon their embraces. Katharine, thus withdrawn, felt her loneliness.¹

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The sombre beauty of these lines is simply astonishing in its appeal. The lines move with a peaceful rhythm corroborating the lonely mood of Katharine. The epigrammatic ending adds force to the sentiments. Like a poet, Virginia Woolf is using the language of gestures which adds a structural dimension of poetry to this

¹ Night and Day, p. 319.

passage. We understand not the words, but their hidden meaning and underlying music. The following extract exemplifies it:

The music had ceased in the rapture of its melody. He strained to catch the faintest lingering echoes; for a moment the memory lulled him into peace; but soon it failed, and he paced the room so hungry for the sound to come again that he was conscious of no other desire left in life. She had gone without speaking.... the immense desire for her presence churned his senses into foam, into froth, into a haze of emotion that removed all facts from his grasp, and gave him a strange sense of distance, even from the material shapes of wall and window by which he was surrounded.¹

Only a poet can present such an immense variety of emotions in such a compressed form. The evocative and symbolic language has its own charm, and the auditory images add to the poetic atmosphere. The flabbergasted attitude of Ralph is vividly presented through a careful selection of words. The shock of Katharine's departure leaves him dumbfounded. The vehemence and concentration of his desire is depicted in the swift rhythm of the language. The images of the foam and froth suggest poetically the churning restlessness of his attitude. The long concluding sentence accentuates his ambiguous understanding of facts and of life itself:

The space of the room behind became, in Ralph's vision, the centre of the dark, flying wilderness of the world; the justification for the welter of confusion surrounding it; the steady light which cast

1 Night and Day, p. 346.

its beams, like those of a lighthouse, with searching composure over the trackless waste.¹

The awareness of mingled agony and ecstasy of love creates the powerful poetic effect in this passage. Ralph Denham's love compels him for the hyperbolic images of the room as the centre of the universe. However, in the given context, the imagery is not only apt but also beautifies the expressed emotions. Denham feels that after a long stretch of wasted years, he has ultimately found a mission in his life. The functional and recurrent symbols like the lighthouse beam, and phrases like the "flying wilderness", "trackless waste", etc., transform the atmosphere in an instant. The polemic and exalted style of the passage gives an added poetic depth to it. The rhythm, cadence and gestures of these lines can be compared with the style of Turgenev in his lyrical stories like "Spring Torrents", in which Dmitry Sanin experiences the same agony. A passage from Turgenev's famous novella "First Love" can be quoted here to evince the marked similarity of the emotion and its treatment:

A light breeze rose for a moment; something flashed across the sky; a shooting star. "Is it Zinaida?" I wanted to ask, but the words died on my lips. And all of a sudden, as it often happens in the middle of the night, a profound stillness prevailed.... Even the grasshoppers stopped chirping in the bushes, and from somewhere came the sound of a window being closed.²

1 Night and Day, p. 357.

2 Ivan Turgenev, Three Short Novels, trans. Grigori Filippovsky (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 130.

The lyrical intensity of Virginia Woolf is nowhere belittled by this comparison. Let us quote another extract to illustrate the point :

But she could not reduce her vision to words, since it was no single shape coloured upon the dark, but rather a general excitement, an atmosphere, which, when she tried to visualize it, took form as a wind scouring the flanks of northern hills and flashing light upon cornfields and pools.¹

Virginia Woolf's figurative style and delicate sensibility have contributed much to the poetical mode of expression. She uses language as a symbolic power to distil her feelings. In this process images and symbols are used aesthetically to suggest and give insight into the ineffable in human thought and feeling. To suggest her inscapes and to evoke her instresses, she uses images and symbols abundantly right from her very first novel, very much like Joyce, Cide, Kafka and Faulkner. In Night and Day she uses the atmosphere and landscape suggestively as is evident in the following lines:

He felt himself now, as he had often fancied other people, adrift on the stream, and far removed from control of it, a man with no grasp upon circumstances any longer.... He sat himself down, in spite of the chilly fog which obscured the farther bank and left its lights suspended upon a blank surface, upon one of the riverside seats, and let the tide of disillusionment sweep through him.²

¹ Night and Day, p. 302.

² Ibid., p. 741.

Trying to lay more stress on the inner mental turmoil than on the outer physical expressions, Virginia Woolf uses the obscuring chilly fog, the swift race of dark-coloured waters, and the blank shore to suggest symbolically the state of Ralph's confused, tumultuous mind. The obscuring chilly fog not only suggests the benumbing pain that has flooded his whole being and taken possession of every governing seat, but also evokes the bleakness of future that he feels on seeing his "old romance" coming to an end and the substantial world, with its prospect of avenues leading on and on, slipping away from him. The swift waters, besides suggesting the rushing on of his life towards oblivion, symbolizes the turbid tumult of his feelings of rage, pain and disillusionment, and his sense of exhaustion, lack of control, and of being "adrift on the stream."

Similarly, Rodney, who is staying at Stogdon House during Christmas week, feels slighted and is angry with Katherine. On their way back from Lincoln, they get down from the carriage about two miles from Lampshar near a lonely heath;

In summer it was a pleasant place, for the deep woods on either side murmured, and the heather, which grew thick round the granite pedestal, made the light breeze taste sweetly; in winter the sighing of the trees was deepened to a hollow sound, and the heath was as grey and almost as solitary as the empty sweep of the clouds above it.¹

1 Night and Day, p. 213.

The wintry scene with sighing trees and prevailing greyness appropriately reflects their depressed mood, and the lack of warmth and colour in their feelings at that particular moment of life. When Rodney implores her to say that she cares for him, she "could not force herself to speak a word. The heather was growing dim around them, and the horizon was blotted out by white mist."¹ This delineation of the dim misty atmosphere in a deeply poetic manner and in suggestive words becomes almost a symbol of Katharine's damp feelings towards Rodney;

To ask her for passion or for certainty
seemed like asking that damp prospect
for fierce blades of fire, or the faded
sky for the intense blue vault of June.²

Katharine's emotional crisis is poetically presented with sympathy and understanding. The "scattering of dead leaves all round them which had been blown by the wind into heaps, a foot or two deep, here and there",³ that Katharine notices while explaining her feelings, reflects the nature of her emotion for Rodney -- it is dead and withered.

When we look at Night and Day with a knowledge of Virginia Woolf's subsequent development as a writer of poetic novels, it seems to be full of mist, dream and

1 Night and Day, p. 217.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 219.

disembodiment. The solidity of the chronological structure and setting are really an illusion, and illusion itself is the hidden theme of the novel; though this theme is brought out more starkly in The Years. In this novel we find some symbolic and allegorical passages saturated with profound poetic beauty, in which we see not only the precise imagery and scrupulous accuracy, but also a penetrating insight and regard for minute details. The following extract serves to illustrate it.

'You don't understand, I mean, my real feelings; how could you? I've only now faced them myself.... I don't know what to call it' -- she looked vaguely towards the horizon sunk under mist -- 'but, anyhow, without it our marriage would be a farce'--1

The horizon, sunk under mist towards which she looks vaguely, appears to her a symbol of the farce that her marriage would be, if she marries without having any love for Rodney. It would be all mist without any ray of hope or any bright spot to look forward to. Such a figurative delineation of human psyche imparts a poetic beauty to these lines. Again,

Precisely at that moment, owing, perhaps, to her vicissitudes of feeling, all sense of love left her, as in a moment a mist lifts from the earth. And when the mist departed a skeleton world and blackness alone remained -- a terrible prospect for the eyes of the living to behold. He saw the look of terror in her face, and, without understanding its origin, took her hand in his.2

1 Ibid. and Ibid., p. 220.

2 Ibid., p. 373.

The image of mist poetically suggests a vapour covering the reality of human feelings. Once it vanishes, the stark reality is apparent in its full horror. The suggestivity of this passage and the deep psychological insight impart a poetic dimension to this passage.

Virginia Woolf creates a poetic suggestivity by the clever use of bird-imagery. For instance, the "vitality and composure of her attitude, as of a bright-plumed bird poised easily before further flights, roused him to show her the limitations of her lot."¹ She possesses a clear perceptive eye for minute details. This image suggests Katharine's readiness to initiate her life in the society. The same poetry of words and moods can be traced in other passages also, such as the following one :

In comparison with Rodney, Penham felt himself very secure; he saw Rodney as one of the lost birds dashed senseless against the glass; one of the flying bodies of which the air was full. But he and Katharine were alone together, aloft, splendid, and luminous with a twofold radiance.²

The tremendous visual imagery of these lines at once suggests Rodney's unstable and hazy conditions. The visual effects achieve the quality of a painting and destroy the conventional representation, giving a

1 Night and Day, p. 16.

2 Ibid., p. 360.

profundity to the poetic appeal of these lines. This image is repeated in another context also:

...he seemed, simplified and exhausted as he was, to be like one of those lost birds fascinated by the lighthouse and held to the glass by the splendour of the blaze.¹

In passages like this one Virginia Woolf achieves the qualitative effect of a painting, which she admired so much in Conrad. Cousin Caroline is like a cockatoo,² Aunt Fleanor looks like a parrot,³ and Katharine becomes a snowy owl.⁴

There is a misty, vaporous indistinctness throughout the novel. A vision of the insubstantial nature of our world and life is reinforced and symbolized, as in Conrad, by a visual impressionism where there are no hard outlines, and where the nature of reality depends on the point of view, or the quality of the light. However, there is the beginning of an attempt to give a more solid "geometrical" structures, an attempt to move from impressionism to post-impressionism by the use of recurring images of the web,⁵ a

1 Wight and Day, p. 358.

2 Ibid., p. 109.

3 Ibid., p. 370.

4 Ibid., p. 151.

5 "It was like tearing through a maze of diamond-glittering spiders' webs to say good-bye and escape". (Ibid., p. 19).

thread,¹ and a net, a grid, on which the impressions can fall at random, and yet retain some symmetry or design. However, these hints are not structurally prominent. The images of the sea, the waves and the lighthouse are recurrent in this novel which either evoke a subtler state of mind,² or represent some subtler quality,³ or an abstract idea,⁴ or present the atmospheric background.⁵

The poetic strain in this novel also becomes apparent in the way the characters explore their own "mind" and psyche, often in its creative relationship with nature. Though engrossed in his categorical and schematic planning of life, Denham is deeply moved by the tranquility nature offers to him :

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- 1 "...a vision of threads weaving and interweaving a close, white mesh round their victim." (Night and Day, p. 109).
 - 2 "...he was afloat upon a sea of unknown and tumultuous possibilities" (Ibid., p. 262).
"But the whirl of the atmosphere alone was in Denham's mood, and what of star or blossom appeared was only as a light gleaming for a second upon heaped waves fast following each other. (Ibid., p. 356).
 - 3 "He did not see her in the body; he seemed curiously to see her as a shape of light, the light itself; he seemed, simplified and exhausted as he was, to be like one of those lost birds fascinated by the lighthouse and held to the glass by the splendour of the blaze." (Ibid., p. 356).
 - 4 "...he was both lighthouse and bird;" (Ibid., p. 357).
 - 5 "...where there waves beating upon a shore for him, too, she wondered, and heroes riding through the leaf - hung forests?" (Ibid., p. 289).

Their way took them round the verge of a wood of thin trees standing at the edge of a steep fold in the land. Looking between the tree - trunks, Ralph saw laid out on the perfectly flat and richly green meadow at the bottom of the hill a small grey manor-house, with ponds, terraces, and clipped hedges in front of it, a farm building or so at the side, and a screen of fir-trees rising behind, all perfectly sheltered and self-sufficient. Behind the house the hill rose again, and the trees on the farther summit stood upright against the sky, which appeared of a more intense blue between their trunks. His mind at once was filled with a sense of the actual presence of Katharine.¹

The whole passage is noteworthy for its accurate and unflinching portrayal of the scene. The detailed descriptions of the scenery impart the qualities of painting to this passage. Denham's acute sense of enjoying the panorama of nature is presented in Wordsworthian terms. Like a clever artist, Virginia Woolf depicts certain things in the foreground and some in the background. Denham is conscious of the tree - trunks, rich green meadows, terraces, clipped hedges, screen of trees and the blue sky. The spontaneous beauty not only enchants him, but also accentuates his feeling of love for Katharine, which he himself is not aware of. The same poetic understanding on the author's part can be seen in another passage.

¹ Night and Day, p. 20¹.

The gusts, sweeping along the strand, seemed at the same time to blow a clear space across the sky in which stars appeared, and for a short time the quick-speeding silver moon riding through clouds, as if they were waves of water surging round her and over her. They swamped her, but she emerged; they broke over her and covered her again; she issued forth indomitable. In the country fields all the wreckage of winter was being dispersed; the dead leaves, the withered bracken, the dry and discoloured grass, but no bud would be broken, nor would the new stalks that showed above the earth take any harm, and perhaps tomorrow a line of blue or yellow would show through a slit in their green.¹

The enchanting presentation of nature in its rapturous beauty can easily be compared with that of Wordsworth. The word-picture is extremely clear and beautiful; the sky has been suddenly cleared by the gusts of winds and the moon is moving through the clouds as if the waves of water are surging against her. The moon is continually hiding and emerging from behind the clouds. The beauty of the clouds is juxtaposed with the withered winter surroundings, with dry and discoloured grass and dead leaves. But the passage ends with a hopeful note that soon a streak of blue or yellow would bloom in the grass. This constant awareness of the beauty and mutability of life is one of the major themes of Virginia Woolf's work. Let us quote another passage in this connection:

¹ *Night and Day*, pp. 355-56.

No words that Cassandra could come by expressed the stillness, the brightness, the air of expectancy which lay upon the orderly beauty of the grass walks and gravel paths down which they went walking four abreast that Sunday afternoon. Silently the shadows of the trees lay across the broad sunshine; silence wrapt her heart in its folds. The quivering stillness of the butterfly on the half-opened flower, the silent grazing of the deer in the sun, were the sights her eye rested upon and received as the images of her own nature laid open to happiness and trembling in its ecstasy.¹

Cassandra indulges in simple sensuous pleasures like the pastoral heroines of the Romantic poets. Her recognition of an organic relationship with nature is described in straight simple manner, with an acute eye for minor details. For her, nature holds a promise of equanimity. The imagery is strongly visual, and the language rhythms suit it.

Perhaps, no other author in English has written such a beautiful and lyrical prose, as Virginia Woolf has. Her poetic mode of writing enables her to depict an enormously complex group of relationships which is not possible to do in ordinary fiction. Her realization of emotions, underlying the apparent attitudes of the people, gives an extra depth of meaning to her writing. But to present the human psyche with such skilful mastery she has to devise new stylistic patterns. Like her

¹ Witch and Day, pp. 417-18.

illustrious contemporaries, Eliot and Wesker, she polemically responds to the demands of time; but she responds in a specific language, which was not used earlier in prose. Her language is a necessary component of her poetic novels. Her poetry emanates not only from the rhythms and rhymes of the melodious language, but also from its evocative - imaginative use. For example :

Her eyes were grave but dark with sadness as they rested on him. 'He's already gone,' she thought, 'far away -- he thinks of me no more.' And the fancy came to her that, as they sat side by side, hand in hand, she could hear the earth pouring from above to make a barrier between them, so that, as they sat, they were separated second by second by an impenetrable wall.¹

The long weaving sentence fixes the emotional attitude of Katharine. The sound of the soft words carries a melancholy echo, which increases with every unit of the sentence. The image of the earth pouring from above and creating a barrier between the two is also very natural, heightening the melancholy tones of the language and imparting a poetic richness to it. In support of this assertion, another instance can be quoted:

Splendid as the waters that drop with resounding thunder from high ledges of rock, and plunge downwards into the blue depths of night, was the presence of love she dreamt, drawing into it every drop of the force of life... in which everything was surrendered, and nothing might be reclaimed.²

1 Night and Day, p. 295.

2 Ibid., p. 95.

As in The Voyage Out, so here, too, the desire for release and dissolution is couched in the language of Romanticism. The very excess of the language underlines Katharine's own sense that her desire is bound to be defeated. Her desires contain, moreover, a peculiar contradiction in that she both longs for perfect isolation and believes that this isolation can be achieved only with a heroic lover's aid. The acknowledgement of her desire's fantastical element and of the contradiction in her desires does not lead her to integrate herself with reality; but it rather leads to an emotional paralysis. In Lincoln, when her disgust with her fiancé and her inability to break off the engagement act upon her with equal force, she rides in the carriage in a "state of gloomy self-suppression which resulted in complete apathy."¹ This need for a coherent vision of life is portrayed in a poetically resonant language.

Virginia Woolf uses words like the precise brush-strokes of the painter, thus gaining a plasticity of expression besides attaining the beauty of decorative poetry. For instance:

In front of them the sky now showed itself of a reddish-yellow, like a slice of some semiluent stone behind which a lamp burnt, while a fringe of black trees with distinct branches stood against the light, which was obscured in one direction by a hump of earth, in all other directions the land

1 Night and Day, p. 195.

lying flat to the very verge of the sky. One of the swift and noiseless birds of the winter's night seemed to follow them across the field, circling a few feet in front of them, disappearing and returning again and again.¹

The smooth rhythm of the evocative language suggestively presents the vivacious joy and freshness of Mary when she walks back to her home with Denham. The colours are used lavishly. The transparent reddish-yellow light visible as if from behind a thin curtain constitutes the background of the sky against which dark trees with distinct branches look significantly decorative. The landscape with other details is completed with the image of the circling bird. The landscape is suffused with a marked lyricism by its way of presentation. The colours are put into a meaningful relation with emotions. Even the terse sentences become obliquely suggestive by the clever use of colour impressionism, such as "the City of London, which wore, at this moment, the appearance of a town cut out of grey-blue cardboard, and pasted flat against the sky, which was a deeper blue."²

Virginia Woolf is a poet with a rare mastery over words, moods and almost naked sensibilities. The poetic mode of her writing is particularly evident in the style which she adopts specially for creating an atmosphere

¹ *Night and Day*, p. 166.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

saturated with lyricism. An instance of this is quoted below:

His mind was scaling the highest pinnacles of its alps, where there was only starlight and the untrodden snow. He cast strange eyes upon Rodney, as they encountered each other beneath a lamp-post.¹

Virginia Woolf presents Denham's feelings with immediacy. The rhythm of the sentences flows easily. The image of the "highest pinnacles" is all the more effective because it is juxtaposed with the simplicity of the next sentence. There is no trace of affectation or mannerism. The style is rhythmic, graceful and suggestive which adds a poetic fragrance to the passage. The following extract from the novel is remarkable in this context:

If she had tried to analyse her impressions, she would have said that there dwelt the realities of the appearances which figure in our world; so direct, powerful, and unimpeded were her sensations there, compared with those called forth in actual life. There dwelt the things one might have felt, had there been cause; the perfect happiness of which here we taste the fragment; the beauty seen here in flying glimpses only.²

This somewhat abstract passage gives a remarkably clear and exact exposition of Katharine's severe concentration. The long, thoughtful sentences corroborate Katharine's complicated emotional structure. However,

¹ Night and Day, p. 62.

² Ibid., p. 126.

the language tones are restrained and Katharine escapes rhetorics, adding a depth of meaning to these lines by their simplicity. Yet another example may be quoted to explain it further:

But there certainly she loved some magnanimus hero, and as they swept together among the leafy trees of an unknown world, they shared the feelings which came fresh and fast as the waves on the shore. But the sands of her liberation were running fast; even through the forest branches came sounds of Rodney moving things on his dressing-table; and Katharine woke herself from this excursion by shutting the cover of the book she was holding, and replacing it in the bookshelf.¹

High flights of imagination predominate the passage. The suggestive imagery pin-points the basically romantic character of Katharine, that she is not ready to own. The words are sonorous, soft and musical -- "waves", "shore", "branches", "sands", "leafy trees" etc. --, and build up a semi-transparent atmosphere which enables Katharine to accept Rodney's proposal. The style is a rambling series of phrases and expressions loosely strung together, which suggestively builds up a resonant atmosphere clothed in sheer beauty.

In Night and Day nature is displayed in all her beauty with a poetic delicacy. To illustrate it we can quote a few lines:

¹ Night and Day, pp. 126-27.

London, in the first days of spring, has buds that open and flowers that suddenly shake their petals -- white, purple, or crimson -- in competition with the display in the garden beds....¹

Another instance is necessary to stress the point :

The first signs of spring, even such as make themselves felt towards the middle of February, not only produce little white and violet flowers in the more sheltered corners of woods and gardens, but bring to birth thoughts and desires comparable to those faintly coloured and sweetly scented petals in the minds of men and women. Lives frozen by age, so far as the present is concerned to a hard surface, which neither reflects nor yields, at this season become soft and fluid, reflecting the shapes and colours of the present, as well as the shapes and colours of the past.²

Night and Day is a very traditional novel in its dependence on the well-knit plot-patterns, cleverly thought-out incidents and well-delineated characters. Nevertheless, Virginia Woolf's formulations of new aesthetic standpoint, the urge to analyse thoroughly the psychological processes in depth, an ability to present emotions through significant and suggestive poetry, the immediacy of framework, the delicate originality of handling the situations, the skilful external shapings of the image, the beauty of expression and above all her poetic sensitivity are apparent in this early novel. All this profusely lends the novel an exquisite lyrical poetry which delights the reader immensely.

¹ Night and Day, p. 330.

² Ibid., p. 275.

III Jacob's Room

Jacob's Room, published in 1922, marks the realization of Virginia Woolf's individual style and thought; with it she broke with the traditional form of the English novel. Like the Russian writers she strives to give us an insight into the workings of the minds of characters and endeavours to externalize their emotional states in terms of life. The human soul becomes, as she observes it in Russian fiction, the chief character in her novel.¹ Jacob's Room poetically presents the initial loneliness of the individual, the catastrophic effects of War which wiped out of memory all formative influences that had preceded it, and the haunting question of the ultimate purpose of human life. The wonderful poetry of the novel arises gradually from the novelist's attempts to solve sensitively the mysterious dilemma of life itself. The poetic strain can be traced in the story itself, in Virginia Woolf's style and language, in patterns of imagery; and above all, in the treatment of life and its predicament.

Jacob's Room is more poetic than anything Virginia Woolf has written earlier. It is a series of sketches of Jacob's childhood and youth; it is a record of his own

¹ "The Russian Point of View", Collected Essays, Vol. I, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 244.

impressions, poetically delineated and seen to form an isolated pattern amid others' impressions. It is also a record of other's views of him. The device of recreating a figure through memories and associations is in itself a suggestive and perfectly valid technique which builds up a resonant poetic atmosphere. Like a true poet, Virginia Woolf does not directly state a situation, but depicts it suggestively through various devices. The novel opens with a figurative presentation of Betty Flanders' sense of insecurity:

Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor's little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun. She winked quickly. Accidents were awful things. She winked again. The mast was straight; the waves were regular; the lighthouse was upright; but the blot had spread.¹

This distortion of the scene becomes symbolic of the distortion one experiences under the stress of fear and insecurity. To a widow like Betty Flanders, the entire world appears to have gone crooked to the point of breaking asunder which is presented through the mast of Mr. Connor's little yacht, which bends like a wax candle in the sun. The bending candle becomes an easy symbol for her own unstable life facing the sun of harsh

¹ Jacob's Room (London : Fried/Grenada, 1962), p. 5.

realities of life. Thus being uncomfortably apprehensive, and abruptly finishing her letter to Captain Barfoot, she sets out in search of Jacob who has wandered away on the beach. It is this ability of grasping things psychologically and presenting them with oblique suggestions that constitutes the poetic element in her novels. Like Coleridge, Virginia Woolf is able to create the proper atmosphere by the use of a few apt words. It can be traced in the characterization of Charles Steele, who has been trying to include Betty Flanders in his landscape painting. He is afraid that Mrs. Flanders would get up and start moving in search of her son, and would thus spoil his picture. He tries to hurry, but at the very moment as he looks up he sees "to his horror a cloud over the bay".¹ At the same time, while playing on the beach, Jacob sees a man and woman stretching within a few feet of the sea. He is terrified by their "enormous" looks, and is seized with childish panic. He runs away, sobbing all the time.² Thus we see that Virginia Woolf's mode of comprehending a situation is inherently suggestive and poetic, the expression of which becomes inescapably appealing to the reader. She has a Coleridge-like gift of suggestivity and creating atmosphere by capitalizing on the emotive power of language and psychological means.

1 Jacob's Room, p. 7.

2 Ibid.

The sense of vague fear of the above-quoted incidents is carried to the point of weirdness by externalizing it in terms of outward scenes and atmosphere, with Archer shouting, 'Ja-Cobi! Ja-Cobi!' The choice of echoing words in the following lines further enhances the poetic nature of this situation:

The voice had an extraordinary sadness.
Pure from all body, pure from all passion,
going out into the world, solitary, unanswered,
breaking against rocks -- so it sounded.¹

The solitary, unreciprocated sound with its extraordinary sadness, breaking against rocks evokes a peculiar kind of uneasiness in the mind of the reader. The uneasiness is amplified by the delicate introduction of the images of instability and weakness:

The rock was one of those tremendously solid brown, or rather black, rocks which emerge from the sand like something primitive But there, on the very top, is a hollow full of water, with a sandy bottom; with a blob of jelly stuck to the side, and some mussels. A fish darts across. The fringe of yellow - brown seaweed flutters, and out pushes an opal-shelled crab... and begins his journey on weakly legs on the sandy bottom.²

The sandy bottom and the weak - legged crab against the solid black rock suggest instability and infirmity, adding to the sense of Betty Flanders' helplessness, which the novelist is trying to convey. The same poetic

1 Jacob's Room, pp. 6-7.

2 Ibid., p. 7.

perception of subconscious emotions can be traced in the analysis of Hetty Flanders' character. The opening paragraphs of the novel state her loneliness without any specific statement. The effort of making a decision to leave Cornwall because some accident has occurred, and the anxiety of a single parent's responsibility and her appeal to Captain Barfoot, who has become the focus of her romantic fantasies, are connected by the image of welling up tears. It is not the tears themselves but what is seen through the tears that precisely communicates her feelings. The flashing glass house, and the scattering of knives in the kitchen reveal her violent and threatening world. Even normal and apparently placid phenomena of nature is seen through the violent images of the moors "shuddered and brightened as the clouds went over", and tulips "burnt in the sun."¹

In the novel each sentence seems to be contrived to suggest something figuratively about the psychological build-up of the characters. Sometimes, as in Wordsworth and Shakespeare, the moods of the characters are matched with the natural background, which further adds a poetic dimension to the descriptions. For example:

The wind was rising. The waves showed that uneasiness, like something alive, restive, expecting the whip, of waves before a storm. The fishing-boats were leaning to the water's brim. A pale yellow light shot

¹ Jacob's Room, p. 15.

across the purple sea; and shut. The lighthouse was lit. 'Come along', said Betty Flanders. The sun blazed in their faces and glistened the great blackberries trembling out from the hedge which Archer tried to strip as they passed.¹

The passage externalizes and heightens the vague fears of Betty Flanders in visual terms. Virginia Woolf touches all the time the verge of the problem of reality, not directly like Pirandello, but by implication. The uneasiness of the receptive waves, the agitation and vitality of colour, the rising wind and the anticipated hurricane evoke an eerie sense as if something calamitous is going to happen. Thus against the phenomena of visible turbulence in nature, fear rises in a delicate crescendo:

'Don't lag, boys. You've got nothing to change into!' said Betty, pulling them along, and looking with uneasy emotion at the earth displayed so luridly, with sudden sparks of light from greenhouses in gardens, with a sort of yellow and black mutability, against this blazing sunset, this astonishing agitation and vitality of colour, which stirred Betty Flanders and made her think of responsibility and danger.²

Expressing full well the fear of Betty Flanders, the short, impatient phrases and the choice of words like "pulling", "uneasy emotion", "sudden sparks", "astonishing agitation", "stirred", etc., heighten the emotion. This intensity of emotions, and the consequent immediate presentation of moods, resulting in a pervasive sensitive

1 Jacob's Room, p. 9.

2 Ibid.

poetry of its own kind, can be traced throughout the novel:

Simeon said nothing. Jacob remained standing. But intimacy - the room was full of it, still, deep, like a pool. Without need of movement or speed it rose softly and washed over everything, mollifying, kindling, and coating the mind with the lustre of pearl, so that if you talk of a light, of Cambridge burning, it's not languages only. It's Julian the Apostate.¹

The sympathy and friendship of young boys towards one another, and the resultant feeling of intimacy are portrayed as something more than a neat idea. The intermittent divisions of the sentences gradually unfold into the long, melodious sentence. The choice of words is also significantly rhythmic which adds to the overall poetic charm of the novel.

Virginia Woolf's words mean more than mere words of prose; they have a poetic quality about them. The fluidity of style is maintained throughout the novel which contributes immensely to the overall poetic fabric of the novel. Even the pensive, thoughtful passages have a definite poetic appeal. The extract, quoted below, bears witness to it :

It seems that men and women are equally at fault. It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow - creatures is utterly unknown.... In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we

¹ Jacob's Room, pp. 43-44.

embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows.¹

The chaste language and the quiet mode of presentation suit the mood of the author. The whole passage possesses a quiet pensive beauty, which compels us to view the questions in a serious light.

The style in Jacob's Room is experimental, the balance of the mature novels is not yet struck. Throughout the novel the allusive and evasive quality of the beginning is maintained and intensified. The tale is told with confidential asides and rhetorical questions, oddly reminiscent of Charles Lamb : "Have you ever watched fine collie dogs couchant at twenty yards distance?"² This subtle pastiche serves its subtle purpose, though a bit self-consciously.

In Virginia Woolf's novels a poetic resonance is gained also with the help of phrasing rhythm, vocabulary and mere sound. For example :

It was as if a stone were ground to dust; as if white sparks flew from a livid whetstone, which was his spine; as if the switch-back railway, having swooped to the depths, fell, fell, fell. This was in his face.³

1 Jacob's Room, p. 69.

2 Ibid., p. 156.

3 Ibid., p. 91.

The shorter units of the sentence culminate in the three-fold repetition of fell, fell, fell, emphasizing Jacob's sudden revulsion on seeing Florida in another man's arms. Here Virginia Woolf's overtones are percussive, precise and repetitive, yet the emotion itself is not described. What we have is its emotive suggestion through the physical and mental states of Jacob. The above quoted lines enlarge our knowledge of the situation emotionally. The takes assonance close to rhyme and carries the echoing words so far that it almost ends in a repetitive refrain of fell, fell, fell. The sounds of the words effectively enlarge the meaning of explicit statement which adds to the poetic charm of the passage. The use of nature symbols also imparts a delicacy to the passage. Virginia Woolf turns again to symbolic suggestion, while describing the state of Jacob's mind :

...He has turned to go... back to his rooms
.... The snow, which had been falling all
night, lay at three O'clock in the afternoon
over the fields and the hill. Clumps of
withered grass stood out upon the hill-top;
the furze bushes were black, and now and
then a black shiver crossed the snow....
The sky was sullen grey and the trees of
black iron.... later there was a mournful
cry.... A motor car came along the road
shoving the dark before it.... The dark shut
down behind it....

Spaces of complete immobility separated
each of these movements. The land seemed to
lie dead.¹

¹ Jacob's Room, pp. 94-96.

By employing symbols of snow, clumps of withered grass, a black shiver, the sullen sky, a mournful cry, and the land appearing to lie dead, Virginia Woolf demonstrates Jacob's state of mind - lost, cold, and emotionally dead.

The language of the novel has an unmistakable poetic charm. We can examine its beauty word by word very much like a lyric poem. The artistic excellence of the novel's design can only be understood through an appreciation of its mood, imagery and verbal intensity which create a poetic atmosphere :

But about midnight there sometimes rises, like a veiled figure suddenly woken, a heavy wind; and this now flapping through Trinity lifted unseen leaves and blurred everything. ...Up go the elm branches, out blow the sails, the old schooners rear and plunge, the grey waves in the hot Indian Ocean tumble sultrily, and then all falls flat again.

So, if the veiled lady stepped through the Courts of Trinity, she now drowsed once more, all her draperies about her, her head against a pillar.¹

The language here is artistically used to comment on the meaning and significance indicated by the author. This comment provides increased specification and particularization, giving at the same time a new enlargement and enrichment. Thus the significance of emotions is at once grasped poetically. Let us give another instance:

¹ Jacob's Room, p. 43.

A breadth of water gleamed. Already the convolvulus moth was spinning over the flowers. Orange and purple, nasturtium and cherry pie, were washed into the twilight, but the tobacco plant and the passion flower, over which the great moth spun, were white as china. The rooks creaked their wings together on the tree-tops, and were settling down for sleep when, far off, a familiar sound shook and trembled - increased - fairly dinmed in their ears - scared sleepy wings into the air again - the dinner bell at the house.¹

The minuteness of expression is here coalesced with a poetic expression. The details are copiously recorded with a plasticity of colour descriptions. The evocative use of language is coupled with a melodious prose which creates the simplest kind of poetic effect. But in the course of the narrative more than often this effect is enriched and complicated by all kinds of counter-suggestions and expansions derived from a subtle use of sound, suggestion and association. The following passage evidences it:

Sunlight strikes in upon shaving -
glasses; and gleaming brass cans; upon
all the jolly trappings of the day;
the bright, inquisitive, armoured,
resplendent, summer's day, which has
long since vanquished chaos; which has
dried the melancholy mediaeval mists;
drained the swamp and stood glass and
stone upon it; and equipped our brains
and bodies with such an armory of
weapons that merely to see the flash
and thrust of limbs engaged in the

¹ Jacob's Room, p. 54.

conduct of daily life is better than the old pageant of armies drawn out in battle array upon the plain.¹

The very nature of the novel is poetic. Virginia Woolf interprets human life with imaginative sympathy, fully and completely. Her prose is a poetic prose. She borrows from the technique of poetry while retaining the essential prose rhythms:

Two fishing luggers, presumably from St. Ives Bay, were now sailing in an opposite direction from the steamer, and the floor of the sea became alternately clear and opaque. As for the bee, having sucked its fill of honey, it visited the teazle and thence made a straight line to Mrs. Pascoe's patch, once more directing the tourist's gaze to the old woman's print dress and white apron, for she had come to the door of the cottage and was standing there.²

The novel develops in a succession of images, which further intensify the poetic atmosphere. The projection of characters through imagistic impressions also raises certain questions. The essential advantage of Virginia Woolf's poetic method is that it enables her to see both beauty and ugliness of human psyche with a lyrical intensity. One of the questions the novel poses is love between man and woman. Jacob repeatedly sees the person he loves in a grotesque light. On Guy Fawkes' Night Florinda tells Jacob that she is unhappy. She reaches out to him, but he sees her not as a person

1 *Jacob's Room*, p. 159.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

with emotional needs, but as an eerie marionette or a spectre;

Of the faces which came out fresh and vivid as though painted in yellow and red, the most prominent was a girl's face. By a trick of the firelight she seemed to have no body. The oval of the face and hair hung beside the fire with a dark vacuum for background. As if dazed by the glare, her green - blue eyes stared at the flames.¹

The flames are then extinguished, and all the faces go out, so that the bodiless girl disappears altogether. Clara Durrant appears to Jacob in a more attractive light ("wonderfully beautiful, with lights swimming over her in coloured islands"²), but she is "semi-transparent", and thus this celestial vision, like the macabre one of Florinda, is another symptom of his inability to grasp the substance of the women. Similarly, the grape and vine imagery in the scene in which Jacob discovers his attraction for Clara Durrant shows a tender sensuality, which ultimately remains impotent and unrealized;

'There!' she said, cutting through the stalk. She looked semi-transparent, pale, wonderfully beautiful up there among the vine leaves and the yellow and purple bunches, the lights swimming over her in coloured islands. Ceraniums and begonias stood in pots along planks; tomatoes climbed the walls....

1 Jacob's Room, p. 71.

2 Ibida., p. 79.

'One bunch of white, and two of purple,' she said, and she placed two great leaves over them where they lay curled warm in the basket.

'I have enjoyed myself', said Jacob, looking down the greenhouse....

'You're too good -- too good,' she thought, thinking of Jacob, thinking that he must not say that he loved her. No, no, no!

The whole passage is admirable for its evanescent language, evocative style and suggestive overtones. The lines seem to be written in blank-verse without any formal division. The subconscious desires, unfulfilled dream and the throbbing of soul are suggested through various levels of suggestive meanings. Like the Brontës, Meredith and Hardy, Virginia Woolf also places the young lovers against an appropriate background. The grapes and grape-vines have always been associated with the image of love. In this case also, grape-laden vines and flowering-plants symbolize the young lover's unexpressed desires and vague, unconscious longings. The suggestive over-tones enrich the verbal poetry of the passage, which continues as follows:

The children were whirling past the door, throwing things high into the air.

'Little demons!' she cried. 'What have they got?' she asked Jacob.

'Onions, I think', said Jacob. He looked at them without moving'.²

1 Jacob's Room, pp. 59-60.

2 Ibid., p. 60.

The children's playing with onions, which, when all their layers are removed, yield nothing, symbolise the fruitlessness of their vision. The "something wonderful" remains a mere fantasy, since the novel offers no support to it.

One of the themes which the novel illustrates poetically is the connection between the spiritual and the material. Jacob, as Johnstone points out, is 'not there', but what the novel attempts is to clear a space between the fixity of a statue and the elusiveness of an 'absence', between these final terms of the scale the human spirit moves. This movement is made up of repetitions, but they can be interwoven with variations and so become a rhythm. The repetition of a phrase expresses the movement of the mind as it circles round the problems of connecting the mind and body: "The problem is insoluble. The body is harnessed to a brain. Beauty goes hand in hand with stupidity.... The problem is insoluble".¹ The repeated phrase forms a kind of parenthesis around the meditation, and gives it a sense of stillness, imparting a poetic depth to these lines.

Virginia Woolf has used the device of repetition as a constituent factor in creating the underlying poetry of her novel. The repetition involved in tradition gives

1 Jacob's Room, p. 79.

rise to the mock-heroic element in the novel. The pictures which hang in Jacob's room are more unreal than visual art as described by Plato, for they are copies of copies, "Then there were photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua - all very English."¹ Byron is in the shade of the Greeks, but Jacob is a shadow of this shade. Mother Stuart is a debased oracle, something like Madame Sosostris of The Waste Land :

Stuart, as the lady would point out, is the name of a Royal house; but what that signified, and what her business was, no one knew; only that Mrs. Stuart got postal orders every Monday morning, kept a parrot, believed in the trans-migration of souls, and could read the future in tea-leaves.²

Likewise, the repeated "eternal conspiracy of hush" gives a sense of false solemnity to Mrs. Flanders' baby-sitting.³ Later in the novel, the repetition of "the boy Curnow" is a mocking elevation of the urchin to the status of epic hero. The constant use of inversion is an attempt to convey a sense of solemnity. One of the final repetitions in the last chapter is an inversion of this kind, giving Jacob's Room a sculptured quality in contrast to his 'character' which is all movement

1 Jacob's Room, p. 36.

2 Ibid., p. 75.

3 Ibid., p. 11.

like a flickering light. The repetition and inversion enforce this contrast, "listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there."¹

The novel also poetically deals with the problem of the ultimate futility of human life. The haunting question of what remains from a handful of incomplete impressions becomes central to the question of what a person is, for that, essentially, is all we have:

Strolling in at dusk, Sandra would open the books and her eyes would brighten...and subsiding into the arm-chair she would suck back again the soul of the moment.... She had had her moments. Meanwhile, the great clock on the landing ticked and Sandra would hear time accumulating, and ask herself, 'What for? What for?'

'What for? What for?' Sandra would say, putting the book back, and strolling to the looking glass and pressing her hair.²

The long winding sentence at once shows Sandra's restless energy and boredom with herself. The two concluding sentences epitomize this inertia of her life. The rhyme of the sentences is made deliberately functional. The overwhelming question of "what for" gains no response from life. But its successive repetition evokes an

1 Jacob's Room, p. 172.

2 Ibid., p. 157.

insipid response, reminding us of the introductory pages of Zola's La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret. The thematic obsession with man-women relationship in a poetic mode can also be compared with Zola's novel. In Virginia Woolf's novels, as also in Zola's, the aptness of the imagery, the resources of the vocabulary, the virtuoso orchestration of the mere words and the never interrupted comprehension of psychological motives of man build up a superb poetic atmosphere. The language also has a poetic elasticity presenting man and his nature together, and yet detached. The poetic use of images may be traced in simpler and comparatively straight-forward passages such as the following one:

As for the beauty of women, it is like the light on the sea, never constant to a single wave. They all have it; they all lose it. Now she is dull and thick as bacon; now transparent as a hanging glass.¹

Then there are absolutely lyrical passages where the novelist's imagination takes its full swing:

What can be more violent than the flight of boughs in a gale, the tree yielding itself all up the trunk, to the very tip of the branch, streaming and shuddering the way the wind blows, yet never flying in dishevelment away?²

¹ Jacob's Room, pp. 111-12.

² Ibid., pp. 116-17.

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2 Ibid., pp. 116-17.

The supple movement of the language presents vividly the rising waves, coming one after another and merging again with the sea. The visual image of the tree is also aptly portrayed. The word-sounds "streaming", "shuddering", etc., echo the sound of the violent wind, thus adding to the poetic charm of the whole passage. The rhythm of the lines moves quickly to suggest the violence of the atmosphere. Again, another example may be quoted:

A sparrow flew past the window trailing a straw -- a straw from a stack stood by a barn in a farmyard. The old brown spaniel snuffs at the base for a rat. Already the upper branches of the elm trees are blotted with nests. The chestnuts have flirted their fans. And the butterflies are flaunting across the rides in the forest. Perhaps the Purple Emperor is feasting, as Morris says, upon a mass of putrid carrion at the base of an oak tree.¹

The alliteration of "s" in the first two sentences, and of "p" in the last sentence produces a sonorous musical effect. The exactness of description, and the vivacity of language further intensify the poetry of the passage. The visual effects are reinforced with the sonorous musical sounds of the words, which add to the overall poetic effect.

Virginia Woolf uses colours in meaningful relation to the mood which she attempts to present. She often

¹ Jacobs's Room, p. 120.

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By six o'clock a breeze blew in off an icefield; and by seven the water was more purple than blue; and by half-past seven there was a patch of rough gold-beater's skin round the Scilly Isles, and Durrant's face, as he sat steering, was of the colour of a red lacquer box polished for generations. By nine all the fire and confusion had gone out of the sky, leaving wedges of apple-green and plates of pale - yellow....¹

In this passage feelings, sensations and the scenery itself are indicated through the mere sound of words. Phrases like "red...for generations", "pale-yellow", etc., portray the exact shade the author wants. In this passage, the symbols of the lighthouse and the waves are presented as a part of the great phenomena. The passage continues:

The beam from the lighthouse strode rapidly across the water. Infinite millions of miles away powdered stars twinkled; but the waves slapped the boat, and crashed, with regular and appalling solemnity, against the rocks.²

The lighthouse beam and the regular thud of the waves retain and develop their accurate finality in Virginia Woolf's later works. Again,

1 Jacob's Room, pp. 49-50.

2 Ibid., p. 50.

Gulls rode gently swaying in little companies of two or three quite near the boat; the cormorant, as if following his long strained neck in eternal pursuit, skimmed an inch above the water to the next rock; and the drone of the tide in the caves came across the water, low, monotonous, like the voice of someone talking to himself.¹

The lines are poetic in spirit and in expression. The suggestive words appeal to our visual sense -- a whole landscape is presented before us with the help of the rhythm of the evocative language. The arrangement of phrases, and the distribution of pauses within the sentence are also poetically significant. The minuteness of observation and the exact portrayal help us to understand the mood of the author. It can be seen in other passages also, such as the one quoted below:

The water fell off a ledge like lead -
like a chain with thick white links.
The train ran out into a steep green
meadow, and Jacob saw striped tulips
growing and heard a bird singing, in
Italy.²

The waterfall is indirectly compared with the speed of the train. The comparison with lead presents at once the beauty and the thickness of the atmosphere. Therefore there is no time interval between the words and their comprehension in thought, which results in a poetry of its own kind. The expression is immediate and poetic. Another instance of this kind of poetic

1 Jacob's Room, p. 49.

2 Ibid., p. 130.

prose may be quoted from the novel. The destructiveness of society is felt more strongly on a personal rather than on an economic level. Thus, even at a modest university professor's luncheon, Jacob feels 'shock, horror and discomfort.' Fleeing from the party, he finds immediate pleasure in his solitude;

...for he draws into him at every step as he walks by the river such steady certainty, such reassurance from all sides, the trees bowing, the grey spires soft in the blue, voices blowing and seeming suspended in the air, the springy air of May, the elastic air with its particles - chestnut bloom, pollen, whatever it is that gives the May air its potency, blurring the trees, gumming the buds, daubing the green. And the river too runs past, not at flood, nor swiftly, but cloying the ear that dips in it and drops white drops from the blade, swimming green and deep over the bowed rushes, as if lavishly caressing them.¹

The extended wistful language of this passage, with its live imagery, is characteristic of much of Virginia Woolf's writing. Her language is always careful, and the imagery, however indulgent or 'literary', reveals a consideration for her themes. The air is elastic, thus giving the mind the opportunity to find its own form. When Jacob rouses himself from this solitary musing, returning to a more public reality, he feels as though 'a piece of elastic had snapped in his face'. The 'blurring' and 'daubing' of colours, and the 'gumming' of the buds, represent a softening of detail and focus; yet

¹ Jacob's Room, p. 34.

this softening is seen as part of the air's 'potency' for the diminishing of ordinary boundaries, and an increasing vagueness makes the mind more potent. The movement of the river -- 'not at flood nor swiftly' -- mirrors the semi-passive movement of the mind in its private and individual state; in such a state it seeks its own uninterrupted flow. As the mind receives impressions of the external world according to its own law and logic, these impressions become part of the mind; they lead to thoughts with the seductive ease of an ear dipping into gently flowing water, generating movement.

Jacob's Room is one of the earliest novels of Virginia Woolf. In some ways, it is also a bitter novel, since in its society lies are regarded as politeness, and gossips "stuff out their victims' character" till they are swollen and tender "as the livers of geese exposed to a hot fire".¹ Through this angry metaphor, Virginia Woolf points to a causal analysis of political forces. The sense of cruelty so violently exposed in this metaphor is felt to be as real as war. Juxtaposed to it is the image of young men descending into the depths of the sea to be blown up there.² The freedom of self-realisation can be imagined only when it is believed that humanity is finished;

1 Jacob's Room, p. 154.

2 Ibid.

To gallop intemperately; fall on the sand
tired out; to feel the earth spin; to have -
positively - a rush of friendship for stones
and grasses, as if humanity were over, and
as for men and women, let them go hang....¹

Amid the comedy of love and the tragedy of social restrictions that surround him, Jacob can merely contemplate such release objectively. His strength lies in his assurance of this possibility of independence and release, and in his sensitivity to the cruelty that is usually imperceptibly inflicted upon people. In this lies the positive poetry of the novel.

Jacob's Room has a remarkable poetic appeal. In it the scene-setting is not obvious, deliberate stage-managing is concealed, and "the method is poetic, the unity is a poetic unity."² This poetic unity is achieved in a way which reflects faithfully the mode of thought and re-echoes with remarkable clarity the emotional harmonies and discords of Virginia Woolf's own time. Her prose is a poetic prose, and her artistic integrity is purer than that of any of her contemporaries. Her poetic method of approaching and comprehending behavioral aspects of human beings can very clearly be perceived in Jacob's Room. She borrows the rhythm and technique of poetry while retaining the essential beauty of prose.

¹ Jacob's Room, p. 137.

² R. L. Chambers, The Novels of Virginia Woolf (London: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1927), p. 94.

Chapter III
Mrs. Dalloway

"The best preparation for understanding Mrs. Dalloway is to read The Tempest, or Cymbeline, or, better still, A Winter's Tale," says Reuben Brower.¹ True, Mrs. Dalloway is inherently poetic and to understand the singleness of its metaphorical vision, and to grasp the Shakespearean imagination of its author we simply have to follow the measures of poetic criticism. Published in 1925, Mrs. Dalloway is saturated with suggestive, melancholy poetry. In her own words, there "is an ambiguity which is the mark of the highest poetry."² Mrs. Woolf appeals primarily to the imagination. Her earlier experiments with form, diction and language have culminated in this novel, imparting a resonant poetic tone to it. The poetry arises from Mrs. Woolf's special use of language, from the intensity of her visual sense and from her awareness of life below the conscious level.

Behind the time-plan of seventeen hours, from 10 a.m. of a June morning to 3.00 a.m. of the following morning, there sprawls a life of thirty-three years. In

1 Reuben Brower, The Fields of Light (New York : Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 123.

2 Virginia Woolf, "On Not knowing Greek, Collected Essays, Vol. I, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 7.

her Mary Virginia Woolf has talked about the "tunnelling process",¹ according to which the full meaning can be grasped only by those "who can tunnel their way behind the canvas into masses and passages and relations and values."² Like Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway follows the design of an impressionistic painting. We are made aware of how our sense of characters changes gradually. Virginia Woolf shows the kaleidoscope of life shaken into a momentary plan -- its vagueness, casualness, chaos and order result in a splendid impressionism. The major characters meet one another intuitively, and they live in several worlds at once. While they are presented to us, we are always kept oriented in time and space. The Big Ben striking the hours irrevocably symbolises the passage of chronological time, and the movement of characters through parks, streets, squares, etc., indicates the different points in space. Following the epic design on a smaller scale, the past is revealed in instalments, without any sequential order.

Besides the evocative power, Virginia Woolf is also gifted with the creative faculty of form which differs from what is ordinarily called construction in the same way as life differs from mechanism. It is this quality

1 A Writer's Diary, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Triad Crafton; 1985), p. 66.

2 Edward A. Hungerford. "My Tunnelling Process" : The Method of 'Mrs. Dalloway', " Modern Fiction Studies (Lafayette, Indiana U.S.A., 3, 1957), p. 165.

that distinguishes Cézanne. In the case of the painter the 'form' is purely visual, while with Mrs. Woolf the pattern is a mental one, composed directly of mental processes, ideas, sensory evocation, and not of the words used. Mrs. Dalloway possesses shades of an evenness which one might have thought uncatchable. The visual effects are so fine that the eye does not take them in, and that only in the memory they are guessed at from the impression they leave in passing. Exquisitely graded qualities of sound, emotion and reverie are not merely dissected but are imaginatively reconstructed. All that in the earlier novels was analysed is in Mrs. Dalloway transformed into evocative images. Although the psychology is subtle and exact, yet no trace of the psychologist is very explicit. The following extract illustrates the point:

And Clarissa had leant forward, taken his hand, drawn him to her, kissed him,-- actually had felt his face on hers before she could down the brandishing of silver - flashing plumes like pampas grass in a tropic gale in her breast, which, subsiding, left her holding his hand, patting his knee, and feeling as she sat back extraordinarily at her ease with him and light-hearted, all in a clap it came over her, if I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day!

This is much more exact than what analysis can be. The ebb and flow of the imagery is precise, and the rhythm

1 Mrs. Dalloway (London : Granada Publishing Ltd., 1962), p. 43.

of the sentences follows the course of the emotion. First, Mrs. Woolf presents Clarissa's effusion of uncontrolled, blind emotions evoking the image, "the brandishing of silver-flashing plumes", then the emergence from it to a recognition of a diurnal reality is reported rather than described, "leaving her holding...." etc.; and finally the sentence ends with accelerating pace expressing the sudden thought of her marrying him. The whole scene is exquisitely done, and imparts a poetic depth to the novel.

Mrs. Woolf touches the problem of reality, not directly like Pirandello, but by implication. In contrast to the solidity of her visible world, the abstract impression of fear is present throughout the book. Each of the characters -- delicately poetic Mrs. Dalloway herself, the slightly more speculative Peter, and the Elakian lunatic Septimus with more or less formulated hypothesis of the meaning of life -- is an illustration of that bottomlessness on which all spiritual values are based. Clarissa fears death, Septimus fears life, and the progress of their souls hinges on the elimination of this fear from their paths. Clarissa, who loves "life, london; this moment of June",¹ is conscious of a vague fear,

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 6.

'Heavens, the front-door bell!' exclaimed Clarissa, staying her needle. Roused she listened....

'Who can - what can -' asked Mrs. Dalloway.... She heard a hand upon the door. She made to hide her dress, like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy.¹

Clarissa is drawn here as a post-impressionistic picture. The rigid symmetry of the pose, which expresses complete withdrawal from the world of senses, is relieved by the position of the hands set to externalise the tension of a critical moment and by the slight turn of the head. This psychologically and artistically measured gesture depicts the attitude of humility and expectation which constitutes a contrast to the nonchalant ease and confidence of Peter who is just then entering the room. References to the waves and the barking dogs in the earlier passage give an abstract air to this passage. Mrs. Dalloway's character is thus portrayed in a highly poetic way.

In another scene, this apprehension is conveyed to the reader through poetic undertones. The sound of the bells of St. Margaret's, which "glides into the recesses of the heart and buries itself in ring after ring of sound, like something alive which wants to confide itself, to disperse itself, to be, with a tremor of

¹ Mrs. Dalloway, p. 37.

delight, at rest,"¹ is wedded in Peter Walsh's mind to the image of Clarissa in her house, so that when "the sudden loudness of the final stroke" comes, it seems to be tolling "for death that surprised in the midst of life, Clarissa falling where she stood, in her drawing-room. No ! No ! he cried. She is not dead!"²

The mood which Mrs. Woolf catches here poetically is beyond the reach of the psycho-analytical method. The chastity of rhythm creates an aura of sublime poetry, which perfectly conveys the sense and the association. But more strikingly poetic is the description of Clarissa, sewing her green dress. The sentences are so beautiful that we have to break them and appreciate them apart from the context. Emotions stand still and the language becomes highly poetic:

Quiet descended on her, calm, content,
as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to
its gentle pause, collected the green folds
together and attached them, very lightly,
to the belt. So on a summer's day waves
collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and
fall; and the whole world seems to be saying
'that is all' more and more ponderously,
until even the heat in the body which lies
in the sun on the bench says too, that is
all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear
no more, says the heart, committing its
burden to some sea, which sighs collectively
for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects,
lets fall.³

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 46.

2 Ibid.

3. Ibid., pp. 36-37.

The transition here is daring, but wonderfully successful. While Mrs. Woolf is describing the falling of the waves, we never forget Clarissa sewing the dress. The greater rhythm accompanies the lesser, and it brings into the room where Clarissa is sitting its serenity and spaciousness. There is something in the ritual of the sewing, a memory of another rhythm buried deep within it, which an image such as this, so unexpected, so remote, reveals to us. The rhythm of the passage is exquisitely graded. In the daring fullness of the metaphors it has a remote indebtedness to Homer. There is no English prose except perhaps Joyce's which in subtlety and resource can be compared with it.

In Mrs. Dalloway, the sensory impressions are immediately evoked, and therefore a necessary rearrangement of the elements of experience insensibly takes place. In the traditional novel we have on the one hand the character, and on the other the background, each existing in a separate dimension, and the one gently more solid than the other. Sometimes the environment reacts strikingly on the characters; as for instance, in Wuthering Heights, and in Hardy's Wessex novels, but the reaction is not complex and continuous. It is indicated rather than treated; the character and the background retain their peculiar values. But in Mrs. Dalloway, they are more intimately connected -- one

merges into the other. The character is suffused with the emanations from the things he sees, hears, feels and what is presented in a complex of life of which character and background are animate elements. The result of this is less akin to anything else attempted in the novel than to certain kinds of poetry such as Wordsworth's, which records not so much a general judgment on life as a moment of serene illumination, a state of soul.

Thus, what nature is in "The Excursion," London is in Mrs. Dalloway -- a living presence, a source of deep pleasure. The stream of passers-by in London streets is to Wordsworth made up of individual souls, each of whom is potentially realizable as such, a reality and a mystery. The stream of people flowing through the London streets takes on the quality of a vision of human life passing from the known into the unknown. Clarissa also loves "walking in London".¹ The vision of London as a whole, with all its people, is linked with Clarissa's desire to give a party. After a description of her delight and interest in Bond street and the June-morning is a paragraph, portraying almost the entire London -- including what the King and Queen are doing and what people in shops are busy with. Her immediate, vivid perception opens the whole city to her; the imagination,

¹ Mrs. Dalloway, p. 7.

stimulated by creative perception, becomes far-sighted, integrating perception. Her party becomes an expression of her vision; it is her means of realising and sharing it, "she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party."¹ Her excitement is due to her sense that in giving this party, "she is part of it all."² There is a dream-like perception in the description of London, to which the slow solemnity of Mrs. Woolf's language contributes much.

There is as much the quality of vision in Mrs. Dalloway's London, as in Dante's. London has been described variously by different writers : by T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land ("A Crowd flowed over London bridge....")³, by Dickens in Little Gidding, and by Shelley in "Triumph of Life". The Shelleyan enchantments and disenchantments in this poem convey a sense that life is a hollow dream. But there is no such note of disenchantment in the description of London in Mrs. Dalloway. On the contrary the sense of a reality emerging from individual lives assumes a poetic aspect.

Mrs. Woolf creates the atmosphere through evocative imagery, which gives a definite poetic touch to her novels.

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 7.

2 Ibid.

3 "The Burial of the Dead", The Waste Land, ll. 60-4, Selected Poems : T. S. Eliot (London : Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 53.

In Mrs. Palloway, the recurrent imagery indicates an artistic integrity, and an underlying consistent vision. The poetic element in the novel is created by the clever use of repetition, the variations wrought within repetitions, and the contrasts and poises inserted into them. The images of the nun, the waves, the sea, the aeroplane, the stopped motor-car, Big Ben's striking; and the words like "life", "suffer", "solemn", "moment", "enjoy" are repeated again and again. They connect the separate dramatic sequences, similar qualities of experience and function as symbolic metaphors. The metaphorical value of such phrases and images is felt only after they have been met in a number of contexts. This aspect of the novel may be compared with the poetry of Yeats and Eliot. Mrs. Woolf selects her images and metaphors like a poet conscious of the ultimate appeal as a whole. Apropos of this, Reuben Brower says:

The unity of her design depends on the building up of symbolic metaphors through an exquisite management of verbal devices; through exact repetitions, reminiscent variations, the use of related eye and ear imagery, and the recurrence of similar phrase and sentence rhythms.¹

First of all, let us consider the image of the nun, repeated many times in the novel. Clarissa returns home after her walk through the London streets and finds:

1 Reuben Brower, The Fields of Light, pp. 133-34.

The hall of the house was cool as a vault. Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and, as the maid shut the door to, she heard the swish of Lucy's skirts, she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotionsbending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself... how moments like this are buds on the tree of life....¹

In this paragraph, the image of the nun implies a sense of offering, thankfulness and serenity. The imagery of austere humility and tranquility reminds us of Eliot's "Ash-Wednesday." The line "moments like this are buds on the tree of life" is particularly poetic as a restoration of vision and quiet wisdom. But immediately after this a discordant note is played and the pattern shifts from fullness to emptiness. It also reminds us of Eliot's technique of juxtaposing two different moods to underline the effect:

Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went, upstairs, paused at the window, came to the bath-room.... There was an emptiness about the heart of life;....²

The image of the tower at once suggests seclusion, immeasurable, mysterious depths and vague romantic possibilities. The plain rhythm of these lines gradually offers a picture of stale boredom. This passage, in its

1 Mrs. Dalloway, pp. 27-8.

2 Ibid., p. 29.

poetic beauty and depth, can be compared with the opening paragraph of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Monologue".¹ The image of the nun is repeated in various contexts. With each repetition the image is enriched and contains earlier associations as well.

Another image which is repeated continually and imparts a poetic touch to the novel is that of the waves. It occurs in the very beginning of the novel:

And then, thought Clarissa Falloway, what a morning -- fresh as if issued to children on a beach.... How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp....²

The freshness and the smooth rhythms of the evocative language at once remind us of the description of early morning by Wordsworth in The Prelude, which he witnessed on his way home after a village dance:

Magnificent
The morning rose, in memorable pomp,
Glorious as e'er I had beheld - in front,
The sea lay laughing at a distance;....³

The image of the waves is repeated again, "... as if this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym

1 Simone de Beauvoir, "The Monologue" The Woman Destroyed, trans. Patrick O'Brian (London and Glasgow: Wm. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1969), p. 75.

2 Mrs. Falloway, p. 5.

3 The Prelude, Book 4, ll. 323-26, English Verses, Vol. III, ed. W. Peacock (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 633.

liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred...."¹ Here, the all-inclusive quality is emphasized as if the rising wave encounters everything hostile to Clarissa and shields her against it. The waves are endowed with the same quality again in another context;

'K...R...' said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say 'Kay Arr' close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper's, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound, which, concussing, broke.²

The auditory impact of the nursemaid's sound is reproduced very aptly. The deep, soft mellowness of the voice with a strain of roughness at once influences Septimus. The lines have a wonderful melodious quality about them. The ease and the rhythm of these lines can be compared with that of the Romantics. The poetry arises from the apt imaginative reproduction of the emotive experience.

The images of the sea abound in Mrs. Alloway. In the very beginning of the novel the flow of people and of carriage through Westminster brings to Clarissa the same excitement and awe as diving into a strange element. The love and fear of the overflowing life around her, the

1 Mrs. Alloway, p. 14.

2 Ibid., p. 21.

wish to be taken into it and the fear of being swallowed by it are suggested at this stage by the image of sea-beach.¹ This insight into the very heart of her characters lends a poetic depth to Mrs. Woolf's novels. The image is reiterated when Clarissa reaches the Park gates and the memory of Peter Walsh knocks against her thoughts. The mood undergoes a swift change and a sense of loneliness haunts her;

She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.²

Again, the waves and the sea occur as an image of the eternal flux and the rhythmic ebb and flow of life: "...but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself."³

1 Irene Simon, "Some Aspects of Virginia Woolf's Imagery", Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, ed. J.E.M. Latham (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), pp. 57-8.

2 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 9.

3 Ibid., p. 10.

In this passage Virginia Woolf aptly expresses a mysterious feeling of being part of everything, which we also notice in Wordsworth's The Prelude. The images of mist and tree-branches vivify the scenic effect of the passage and present an exact word-picture before us. The spectacle of London-streets has its place and meaning in the greater whole. Such keen observations give a poetic colour to Mrs. Woolf's descriptions.

Virginia Woolf's poetic and psychological insight presents itself in the identification of both the positive and negative elements of conflict through the images of sea. Sometimes the sea manifests danger, threatening an individual to carry him away with it. Septimus, for instance, is haunted by this love and fear complex. He feels now elated and then appalled. He is repeatedly shown as a drowned sailor, and yet on the rock:

But he himself remained high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still, he begged (he was talking to himself again....)†.

In Septimus's awareness of the sublime nature, there is also an element of fear to a great extent. The imagery of this passage is distinct, solid and definite. By repetition Mrs. Woolf attains an indirectly suggestive and ostentatiously evocative atmosphere which helps in

† Mrs. Dalloway, p. 62.

creating the effect of poetry in the novel and adds to its overall charm.

The image of Big Ben's striking occurs many times in the novel. It is associated with the word "solemn." It is used on the very first page : "...chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window...."¹ It is echoed at once on the next page in the first account of Big Ben's striking:

For having lived in Westminster - how many years how? over twenty, -- one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense... before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air.²

The word "solemn" which in the first place has only a vague local meaning of "something awful about to happen", is now connected with a "more particularized terror", the fear of a suspense, of a pause in experience. Each time the word "solemn" is repeated in subsequent description of Big Ben, it conveys this additional meaning. The word recurs three times in the afternoon scene in which Clarissa looks across at an old woman in the next house;³

1 Mrs. Bellamy, p. 5.

2 Ibid., p. 6.

3 Ibid., p. 113.

and a little further : "... Big Ben... laying down the law, so solemn, so just... on the wake of that solemn stroke which lay flat like a bar of gold on the sea."¹ Towards the end of the book, Clarissa goes to the window, again sees the old lady, and thinks; "It will be a solemn sky...."² In the last extract there is some suggestion in the imagery of Big Ben's stroke coming down and marking an interruption in the process of life. The terror symbolized by Big Ben's "pause" has a connection with early life, and "something awful.... about to happen" is associated with "the flap of a wave, the kiss of a wave", the solemnity of life is a kind of sea-terror. Thus through various associations, "solemn" acquires symbolic significance -- some kind of terror of entering the sea of experience and of living life and an inexplicable fear of a "suspense" or interruption.

The repetition of images imparts a poetic suggestivity to Mrs. Dalloway. Besides the image of the Big Ben, the images of the aeroplane and the stopped motor-car are also poetically employed many times till they achieve a symbolic value. Another image of this type is the spider's web -- the idea of people being attached to each other by an invisible thread constantly recurs throughout her novels. For instance:

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 194.

2 Ibid., p. 194.

And they went further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread (since they had lunched with her) which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one's friends were attached to one's body, after lunching with them, by a thin thread....¹

The whole passage is an excellent example of Mrs. Woolf's essentially poetic mind. The language and the style present metaphorically the complacent state of mind of Lady Bruton. The evocative power of language is enhanced by the visual imagery and rhythmic melody of sentences.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Woolf moves from one extremity to another, from London to Bourton, from land to sea and sky, from life to death; but in between she plays on many variations. Allen McLaurin calls this system of transitions a 'key-board' and quotes from Charles Mauron's "Introduction" to Roger Fry's translations of Mallarmé to establish that such a 'keyboard' is essential for all arts:

...if one thinks at all about the conditions of what Roger Fry calls pure art, one cannot fail to see that first of these conditions is the establishment of a keyboard. There can be no architecture without fixed points and subtle methods of passing from one to another; without the modal system, no Gregorian music; without 'tempered' keyboard, no Bach; without depth and scale of luminous values, no true painting.²

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 100.

2 Allen McLaurin, Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved (Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 149.

In fact, Virginia Woolf's novels should be looked at with an approach similar to that of Maureen's to Mallarmé's poetry. What we have in Mrs. Falloway is the establishment of a poetic system of transitions which moves from the complete fusion to the complete separation of the human and the natural. Her images range from the subterranean (the fish, physical sensation) to aerial (the aeroplane, science), and the terrestrial (the tree, myth and metaphor). Within this overall 'keyboard' she constructs various scales of poetic imagination.

Mrs. Woolf's extensive use of metaphor is a means of exploring the boundaries of moods and the allusiveness of the external world; it presents as fact the psychological and symbolic significance of received impressions. A character's psychology is not revealed by the material or social conditions that would interest Bennett, Wells or Galsworthy; nor can a character's psychology be explained by general laws, such as Freud proposes. A character's psychology is best revealed by the poetic method, i.e., by the images and metaphors through which his or her perception is described.

Repeatedly in Mrs. Falloway her hidden self is described as an under-water creature, and, accordingly, it is seen to have a continuous motion, a peculiar freedom and isolation, a capacity to plunge deeper and deeper, and a tendency to see objects as luminous and

distorted. The mobility and freedom associated with an underwater creature are complemented by the resemblance so many of the characters are said to have to birds. Scrope Purvis, seeing Mrs. Falloway in the West End, thinks that she is perched on the curb like a bird, whereas she feels herself to be far out at sea.¹ Septimus is "beak-nosed", and Lucretia is like a bird in her vulnerability and timidity, surrounded by enormous trees,² and Sally Seton, with her brazen independence, reminds Clarissa of a cockatoo. The shared qualities of an underwater creature and a flying creature make these images virtually interchangeable. The birds indicate movement towards life, and the underwater creatures indicate movement towards death. But these two apparently opposing movements are closely related; they are different aspects of the same movement. The colours in the florist's shop flow over Mrs. Falloway like a wave,³ and Septimus believes that he might float on the colours he sees. Clarissa's plunge into the morning-air as she bursts open the French windows, her participation in the phenomenon of rising and falling rocks is the complement of Septimus's plunge to death from the high windows at the end of the book. This imagery in itself is a clear proof of Mrs. Woolf's poetic cast of mind.

1 "....a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious....", Mrs. Falloway, p. 5.

2 Ibid., p. 68.

3 Ibid., p. 74.

In Mrs. Woolf's poetic vision everything reconciles. The birds in Septimus's vision, though sing to the dead in Greek, proclaim that there is no death.¹ He has recurrent dreams of drowning, but these fantasies are always countered by a denial that to be drowned is to be dead. His sense that he is drowned makes him feel separate from his body, so that only his body is drowned. It reminds us of the Hindu philosophy of soul and body having separate existence. The idea of drowning is also associated with Peter Walsh's ecstasy:

It was as if he were sucked up to some very high roof by that rush of emotion, and the rest of him, like a white shell-sprinkled beach, left bare.²

Again, Clarissa's awareness of diminishing receptivity gets excitement in the idea of death:

... such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl.³

The passage is remarkable not only for its concealed death-wish, but also for the vein of poetry which makes it really beautiful. The image of the diver suggests a person about to take a plunge into the unknown, while

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 27.

2 Ibid., p. 135.

3 Ibid., p. 29.

the waves suggest continued flux of time. The imaginative language and its melodious rhythm add to its poetic effect.

Nature in its various forms constitutes a significant poetic background to Mrs. Bellows. Sometimes the human nature is equated with the elemental nature -- as for example, the old woman sings with the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth, just opposite Regent's Park Tube station.

ee um fah um so
foo swee too eem oo,¹

Sometimes the human and the non-human are separated, and sometimes man becomes a mere visitor on the earth and has to project consciously a human face on the external world. The image of the solitary traveller² is such an example. Being farther from nature, Elizabeth objects to be compared to a tree:

People were beginning to compare her to
poplar trees, early dawn, hyacinths,
fawns, running water, and garden lilies;
and it made her life a burden to her....³

In another transition to the scientific attitude, nature becomes a mere coinage, and is seen as 'data'. Between these two extremes lies Septimus, who is

1 Mrs. Bellows, pp. 73-4.

2 Ibid., p. 64.

3 Ibid., pp. 119-20.

'connected' with the trees, but in a way which, like the rest of his madness is a pseudo-scientific relationship between apparent cause and effect;

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made the statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds.¹

The imagery of these lines forms a part of the 'thread' imagery, referred to earlier. Similarly, on the blinds of the official car, tree is used simply as a pattern; but it triggers some hidden war-horror in his memory; "as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames.... The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames."² The same complex of emotions is evoked later by the image of an artificial tree created by an indoor firework, a harmless use of the gunpowder which has given Septimus shell-shock, "as if he had set light to a grey pallet on a plate and there had risen a lovely tree in the brisk sea-salted air of their intimacy...."³ Thus we see that this curious mind-fold relationship between the human

1 Mrs. Holloway, p. 22.

2 Ibid., p. 15.

3 Ibid., p. 42.

and the non-human universe lends a poetic charm to the novel.

Mrs. Woolf's poetic creativeness can also be seen in her use of mock-heroic similes in Mrs. Dalloway. By the cleverly suggestive and poetic use of these similes, she displays the disjunction between the traditional martial values and the actual squalor and waste due to the First World War, personified in Septimus. In this context, the ironic tone and attitude of the novel bring it closer to Eliot's Waste Land:

"Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing
in your heads

But

O O O O that Shakespearian Rag--
It's so elegant
So intelligent...."¹

So Clarissa Dalloway shores against her ruin the song
from Cymbeline:

Fear no more the heat O' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages.²

The mock-epic element of this novel has often been compared with Joyce's use of the epic-technique in Ulysses. Mrs. Woolf is interested in the general type of simile or theme in epic poetry which is able to suggest poetically the sickening waste caused by the War. This waste and degradation is conveyed in the irony

1 "A Game of Chess," The Waste Land, ll. 126-30,
Selected Poems : T. S. Eliot. P. 55.

2 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 10.

of the allusion to Ceres in the following passage:

Something was up, Mr. Brewer knew, Mr. Brewer, managing clerk at Fibleys and Arrowsmiths, auctioneers, valuers, land and estate agents; something was up, he thought, and being paternal with his young men,.... and eventually, so prying and insidious were the fingers of the European War, smashed the plaster cast of Ceres, ploughed a hole in the geranium beds, and utterly ruined the cook's nerves at Mr. Brewer's establishment at Muswell Hill.¹

The simplicity of these lines is prophetic. The nightmarish situation of barrenness is presented objectively in chaste rhythms. It is this perception of the unconscious human psyche, of the universal disorder, and of a peculiar inability to face the reality, which makes the novel extremely poetic, thematically as well as stylistically.

Virginia Woolf's self-consciousness in the use of symbol and imagery is correlated with her conscious evocative use of language. According to Allen McLaughlin, an attempt "to convey Butler's sense of shock and Fry's kinaesthesia is an important element in Mrs. Belloc."² The inherently suggestive use of language in the novel is concrete, but at the same time it is more poetic than

1 Mrs. Belloc, p. 77.

2 Allen McLaughlin, Virginia Woolf : The Echoes Delayed, p. 39.

ordinary language to be connected in some particularly close way to sensation. The language and art of the novel do not merely copy the physical sensation of the characters. In Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Woolf is trying to make language and art come as close as possible to sensation, and for this reason she explores the creative - poetic probabilities of language. We find in Mrs. Dalloway recovery and renewal of language, and a Shakespearean full-bodied vitality informing and forming the imagery and movement of the novel.

According to Coleridge, the peculiar property of poetry is the power of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at. In Mrs. Woolf's novels, this property enables her to express moments of consciousness in her characters with a visionary intensity, hitherto only expressible in poetry. Mrs. Woolf's novels, in a sense, only disguise her poetry, which is expressed through her evocative use of language. We have some excellent examples of such poetic language in the descriptions of Septimus and Rezia.

A mind coming suddenly to obscure consciousness of itself, trembling on the verge of half-apprehended self-discovery, can be shown directly only through poetry. The musical and rhetoric passages of Septimus are therefore deeply poetic in tone and rhythm. Through

him Mrs. Woolf very cleverly establishes a live throbbing relationship with nature, sometimes clandestine and quiescent; but sometimes exultant with sympathetic, even joyous understanding:

Going and coming, beckoning, signalling, so the light and shadow, which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the Strand grey, now made the omnibuses bright yellow, seemed to Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting-room; watching the watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper.¹

The alliterative sounds ("gold", "glow", etc.) and an attempt at the exact representation of shifting colours make the passage vividly poetic. The language fluctuates with the strange irregular rhythms of life, which Henry James desires the novelist to reproduce in his art. The sense of a sensuous wealth of the undergoing experience creates the atmosphere of pure poetry. The resonant poetry of the passage continues:

Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room, and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more.²

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 124.

2 Ibid.

The imagery and rhythm of the passage arise from Septimius's inner responses to the pressure of living through a complex traumatic experience. The suggestions are rich and exuberant. The tree-leaves are compared with nets. The comparison presents an exact replica of the natural scenery. The sounds of the birds coming through the 'waves' are subdued and flimsy. As against the sea of imaginative bliss, the dogs barking on the far-away shore point to a deleterious fact. The repetition of the Shakespearean line forms a poetic refrain. Again,

To be rocked by this malignant torturer
was her lot. But why? She was like a
bird sheltering under the thin hollow
of a leaf, who blinks at the sun when
the leaf moves; starts at the crack of a
dry twig. She was exposed; she was
surrounded by the enormous trees, vast
clouds of an indifferent world, exposed;
tortured; and why should she suffer? why?¹

The passage poetically describes the anguish and helplessness of Rexia, ending in a universal agonized question, 'why?'. Her fruitfulness as a woman is checked and her condition is very aptly portrayed by the image of a lonely, haunted bird. The language movements are controlled and supple like a blank-verse without line-distinction. The faceless ambiguity of the war-victims is described with a poetic passion.

¹ Mrs. Ballouay, pp. 59-60.

In fact, Septimus's complexes are generic and deep-rooted. His realization of his own dilemma comes as a shock even to him. His make-shift aura of security through marriage fails him. The visual and auditory images cluster together underlying his barren spiritual state. In his descriptions, the imagery and the swiftly shifting language-patterns coalesce to state two main tokens of spiritual negation in the modern world -- neutrality and separation. The poetic presentation of this dilemma alone ranks Mrs. Woolf in the category of modern poets and dramatists like Eliot, Osborn and Pinter:

"Beautiful!" she would murmur, nudging Septimus, that he might see. But beauty was behind a pane of glass. Even taste (Ronia liked ices, chocolates, sweet things) had no relish to him.... But he could not taste, he could not feel. In the tea-shop among the tables and the chattering waiters the appalling fear came over him -- he could not feel. He could reason; he could read, Dante for example, quite easily.... he could add up his bill; his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then -- that he could not feel.¹

It is only after he has searched his own psychic probabilities that Septimus turns to the outside world. The moment of Release does not come to him, as it comes to Larry in The Razor's Edge, or to Nekhlyudov in The Resurrection. He is doomed and can easily be compared with the hero of Dostoyevsky's Idiot, whose mad rambling results not from his absurd psychic conditions, but from

¹ Mrs. Bellamy, p. 79.

the sordid imperfections of the world surrounding him. Nevertheless, unlike the hero of Idiot, Septimus very soon plunges into Swiftian hatred:

For the truth is (let her ignore it) that human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. They are plastered over with grinnaces.¹

With the scrupulous accuracy of a poet Mrs. Woolf delineates the sharpness of this realization "as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought".²

In this passage the onomatopoeic use of words, "wavered", "quivered", "burst", etc. poetically embody the feelings of horror and paranoia. The sense of pervaded gloom and wasted resources is emphasized again, through a beautiful selection of words, "... suffering for ever, the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer."³ The indirect repetitions give an ambiguous poetic charm to Septimus's rhetorics.

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 80.

2 Ibid., p. 15.

3 Ibid., p. 24.

The deepest hell is discovered with the death of the soul, which is, in fact, the death of feeling and imagination. This is the crux of Septimus's despair, as it was of Mr. Frustus. Septimus believes that he felt nothing at the time of Evans's death. He also believes that he can see the world's beauty only as something behind a pane of glass. This alienation from one's own feelings is the same state which Coleridge has described in his "Dejection : An Ode". Looking at the stars and sky, he says:

I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are !¹

In Proust's novel Le Temps Retrouvé, Marcel's greatest anguish occurs when the train stops in the countryside outside Paris, and he notes the reddening light of sunset and the trees darkly marked against the sky. But he feels none of the creative quickening that accompanies a vision deepened by imagination. The tension he feels is equal to that of the poetic tension. Septimus's is the similar case.

The grotesque character of Miss Kilman is drawn very much after Dickensian fashion. The inherent poetic note of Mrs. Dalloway heightens our sense of her tragic fate. Her presentation contains an anger which

¹ "Dejection : an Ode", ll. 37-8, English Verse, Vol. IV, ed. H. Peacock (Oxford : The University Press, 1977), p. 119.

encloses her. What emerges most strongly is the way the world is awful for her because of what she is. It becomes, as Blake says, what we behold; and as Doris Kilman stands in the street, the scene is "beaten up, broken up by the assault of carriages, the brutality of vans, the eager advance of myriads of angular men, of flaunting women...."¹ On the other hand, to Mrs. Falloway the street appears as "absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that."² The difference between a hostile and appreciative approach to the world becomes clear. Miss Kilman's voraciousness is a displaced desire to contain beauty within herself. Her love for Clarissa's daughter Elisabeth is felt as a desire to possess the girl and then to die. She cannot create in her vision her own beauty. She seeks possession of another's beauty and, in compensation for her failure, she gorges herself with food : what she cannot devour, she despises. She sees the world as hostile, and she can imagine mitigating this hostility only by dominating it. The deeply psychological portrayal of Miss Kilman is an illustration of Mrs. Woolf's poetic insight into human life.

In passages dealing with her, we find an altogether different zone of experience -- exiguous, neurotic and

1 Mrs. Falloway, p. 114.

2 Ibid., p. 10.

deleterious -- a zone of experience which can be depicted only through a poetic sensitivity. Virginia Woolf's portrayal of Miss Kilman unfolds the hidden motifs of her psyche. Here, we find a poetry of its own kind; though analogies of the imagery of futility and darkness can be drawn from Eliot, Wordsworth and Shakespeare.

Wordsworth records in The Prelude, Book I,

No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.¹

Again, in "The Affliction of Margaret," which is devoid of any hint of the later Wordsworthian consolations in nature :

My apprehensions come in crowds;
I dread the rustling of the grass;
The very shadows of the clouds
Have power to shake me as they pass;
I question things and do not find
One that will answer to my mind;
And all the world appears unkind.²

Though Virginia Woolf is distinctly individual, her expressions are sometimes clearly reminiscent of the great dramatic poetry of Macbeth and King Lear. Her sense of things having gone wrong, of the time out-of-joint, occasionally finds Shakespearean expression and movement with an authentic and disturbing force:

1 The Prelude, Book I, ll. 395-400, English Verse, Vol. III, p. 632.

2 The Affliction of Margaret, ll. 6-70, Ibid., p. 615.

Now she was deserted; now rejoined. Few worshippers came in from the street to replace the strollers, and still, as people gazed round and shuffled past the tomb of the Unknown Warrior, still she harried her eyes with her fingers and tried in this double darkness, for the light in the Abbey was bodiless, to aspire above the vanities, the desires, the commodities, to rid herself both of hatred and of love. Her hands twitched. She seemed to struggle. Yet to others God was accessible and the path to Him smooth.¹

The whole passage successfully conveys Miss Kilman's all-pervading sense of barrenness. The absence of a personal God is enigmatically felt, and the consequent tension heightens our sense of tragedy. But above all, it is the poetic quality of the whole that makes the situation credible.

This emptiness at heart is also shared by Clarissa : "It all looked so empty. All the chairs were against the wall. What had they been doing?"² However well-adapted she is to the social aspects of the public world, she does not share the general denial of the reality of Septimus's vision. She knows that she lacks "something central which permeated...."³ Her inability to respond to her husband's emotional appeals is part of her self-preservation, her attempt to protect the "thing

1 Mrs. Palloway, p. 119.

2 Ibid., p. 105.

3 Ibid., p. 36.

there was that mattered," that refuses to be shared and cannot really be communicated. She feels that "it was very, very dangerous to live even one day."¹ Her solitary room with the 'narrow bed' and tightly drawn sheet, 'fallen plaster' and the 'litter of birds' nests,'² are part of her insipid response. The danger is not simply that other people will mark one as insane; it lies in the creative trend of vision; for the joy of life always has another face of terror -- participation in the world can reveal one aspect as easily as the other.

The very characterization of Clarissa Falloway illustrates the poetic nature of Mrs. Woolf's prose narrative. Poetry does not lie only in rhythmic verses with definite rhyming schemes and fixed number of syllables. Poetry is a state of mind, ambivalent, hard to define, and illusive; but at the same time, it is astonishingly enchanting. Clarissa's moods are dealt with a careful tenderness and poetic ambiguity. For example:

Quiet descended upon her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer's day waves collect, over-balance, and fall; collect and fall... Fear no more says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall....³

1 Mrs. Falloway, p. 9.

2 Ibid., p. 43.

3 Ibid., pp. 36-7.

The seductive language of this passage reveals the peculiar passivity of creative consciousness. It is the passivity of being lulled by waves, of attending to the world partly as a sleeper in total acceptance; and such acceptance is possible because the self is safe in its hypnotic receptivity -- "the body alone listens"--, and is not actively engaged in the impressions it receives. Yet this passivity is, for Clarissa, the result of creative integration; it comes as she sews. The drawing of folds together is the drawing of thoughts together, a healing of the desperate thoughts and responses that the morning has demanded of her. The delicate artistic imagery makes this passage highly poetic.

Clarissa Dalloway is constantly aware of some vague kind of perfection of the flux moving searchingly in a definite direction:

Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it.¹

Or, again :

...the icy claws had had the chance to fix in her.... Each still remained almost whole, and, as if to catch the falling drop, Clarissa plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there... collecting the whole of her at one point.²

Mrs. Woolf recognizes the human mind as a creative power, working in an unknown, mysterious way. Clarissa's

¹ Mrs. Dalloway, p. 33.

epic-awareness lasts only for a short while, the moment then slips away:

Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crucifix; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the cross withdrew; the hard softened. It was over - the moment.¹

These lines poetically suggest the rapidity and the transitory nature of the philosophic apparition.

Right from the very beginning of Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Woolf is aware of a duality. There is a sanity, a legitimate response to reality in Septimus's frantic throwing away of his own life, which Clarissa endorses as she retreats to the small room adjoining that in which her party is being held. She can understand why a young man would relinquish his own life to preserve that integrity which the party tends to destroy. The old woman whom Clarissa sees through the window, the complement of the old man whom Septimus sees across the street as he hurls himself from the window, represents the purely personal, private life which Clarissa has pilfered in her desire for social success, and she is ashamed of being forced to watch this woman in her evening dress who is lost in the process of living.² Clarissa's gladness

1 Mrs. Dalloway, p. 30.

2 Ibid., pp. 16-65.

at the youngman's suicide while she and her friends go on living and holding parties is "the relief of having part of her needs expressed by someone else. With this need fulfilled, she can 'assemble' and return to her task as hostess.¹ In such a state she can communicate with the individual an. unbounded reality of her self.

Like a poet-symbolist, Virginia Woolf attempts to bring art and life together by means of imagination. Her imagery is natural and self-sufficient. It also represents the condensed sensitivity of the environment through an evocative psychological use of language. She refracts the sensation effectively through a tense awareness and a synthesis of objects and impressions. No wonder the underlying poetry of Mrs. Dalloway becomes a logical corollary of the novelist's style.

What is striking about Mrs. Dalloway is that it follows throughout a poetic pattern in which direct links are not easily traceable. The ideas and their logical associations are suggested ingeniously as in a poem of Donne or Eliot. It lends a suggestive melody and a distinct poetic atmosphere to the novel. The novel does not follow a linear explanation. In fact, Mrs. Woolf's essentially aesthetic stance reflects a poet's

1 T. E. Apter, Virginia Woolf, A Study of Her Novels (London : Macmillan, 1979), p. 72.

view-point everywhere. In a word, Mrs. Holloway is a great poetic work not only in its basic design and imaginative language, but also in the very intensity of experience, in the instantaneous vivid evocation of life and in the mutual suffusion of characters and events.

Chapter IV

To the Lighthouse

To the Lighthouse is Virginia Woolf's remarkable contribution to fiction, and marks the perfection of her art of the poetic novel. The lyrical note, subdued passions, epiphany-technique and symbolic motifs, used by Virginia Woolf from the very beginning of her literary career, attain new heights in this novel. Published in 1928, it possesses a deep emotional intensity, a controlled freedom of expression and an extremely imaginative diction, which is not normally associated with prose. Virginia Woolf's acute awareness of life's beauty is inherently coupled with a similar acute awareness of its transience, and this imparts a certain depth to her sonorous poetic style. While trying to finish the reddish-brown stocking for the lighthouse keeper's little boy, Mrs. Ramsay wonders at their hard life :

...to see the same dreary waves breaking week after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and the windows covered with spray, and birds dashed against the lamp, and the whole place rocking, and not be able to put your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea?!

1 To the Lighthouse (New Delhi ; B. I Publication, 1979), p. 4.

The dilemma of being left out in a secluded shelter amidst raging sea is sketched in brief and sharp tones. The drudgery of the daily routine and the consequent staleness of life are presented imaginatively, with a keen eye for minute details. The repeated use of words beginning with a "d" adds to the desolate atmosphere the novelist is trying to convey to the reader.

One of the charms of her poetic mode of narration lies in her ability to exploit fully minor happenings which are insignificant as exterior points of departure for the development of motifs or as new perspectives on a milieu of the given setting, historical or social. She holds to minor, unimpressive and random events, such as measuring the stocking, a fragment of a conversation with the maid, a telephone call, etc.:

... sunk as he was in a grey-green somnolence which embraced them all, without need of words, in a vast and benevolent lethargy of well-wishing; all the house; all the world; all the people in it....¹

The drowsiness of Mr. Carmichael gives to Virginia Woolf an occasion to illustrate his inner attitude of easeful benevolence. Likewise, later Mrs. Ramsay enables the novelist to draw her conclusions about him. His seemingly insignificant slumber portrays his general attitude towards life. Like a deft artist, Virginia Woolf has

¹ To the Lighthouse, p. 11.

used this minor happening of a smug day to reveal the aging, disillusioned philosopher, who still possesses an aura of well-riding around him. Such psychological insight and its proper handling give a poetic touch to her works.

The poetic apprehension of a psychological mood is often coupled with visual effects, which reminds us of Virginia Woolf's interest in painting. While Lily is strolling with Banks in the evening, the sound of a gun shot wakes her from her reverie:

...until her thought which had spun quicker
and quicker exploded of its own intensity;
she felt released; a shot went off close at
hand, and there came, flying from its fragments,
frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of
starlings.¹

The explosion of the gun poetically echoes the "explosion" of Lily's thoughts. The choice of words and the movement of the lines represent the quickly shifting fabric of Lily's mental process, as well as of the starlings' sudden flight. This evocative use of language gives a subtlety of expression to this passage, giving it a flavour of poetry. There follows, immediately afterwards, another shock of meeting Mr. Ramsay suddenly. Then the calming down is expressed in distinctly visual terms again, with the settling of the starlings on the trees. The whole passage is exquisitely composed:

1 To the Lighthouse, pp. 33-4.

His eyes, glazed with emotion, defiant with tragic intensity, met theirs for a second, and trembled on the verge of recognition; but then, raising his hand half-way to his face as if to avert, to brush off, in an agony of peevish shame, their normal gaze, as if he begged them to withhold for a moment what he knew to be inevitable, as if he impressed upon them his own child-like resentment of interruption, yet even in the moment of discovery was not to be routed utterly, but was determined to hold fast to something of this delicious emotion, this impure rhapsody of which he was ashamed, but in which he revelled -- he turned abruptly, slammed his private door on them; and, Lily Briscoe and Mr. Bankes, looking uneasily up into the sky, observed that the flock of starlings which Jasper had routed with his gun had settled on the tops of the elm trees.¹

Only a poet can describe the abundance and variety of successive emotions in such a suggestive manner. Jasper's defiant mood changes to agonized shame, and it becomes apparent that a child is trying to hide his actual emotions. The phrase "slammed his private door on them" beautifully brings out the act of secluding oneself from the emotional encroachment of others. The tautness of Jasper's feelings is poetically captured and is compared with the quiet change of the birds.

Virginia Woolf is preeminently a poet who modulates the formal perspective in many ways. Among the structural forms, which help Virginia Woolf to create a poetic atmosphere in To the Lighthouse, repetition is used both as a technical device and as a theme of the novel. Among her contemporaries, T. S. Eliot has mastered this device,

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 34.

particularly in his Four Quartets. Repetition and recapitulation are important because they provide a poetic basis for enriching the words with a new significance and emotional backup, which otherwise might degenerate into dogma. Virginia Woolf has employed triple repetition in To the Lighthouse to a limited extent. These devices, however, become almost obsessive in Three Guineas and Between the Acts. In To the Lighthouse, it expresses Tansley's anger at his sense of the emptiness in the lives of "these silly women," Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, who "did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat."¹ It also expresses Paul's thoughts after his proposal to Minta Doyle:

The house was all lit up, and the lights after the darkness made his eyes feel full, and he said to himself, childishly, as he walked up the drive, lights, lights, lights, and repeated in a dazed way, Lights, lights, lights, as they came into the house, staring about him with his face quite stiff.²

Throughout Virginia Woolf's work refrain is used to give a sense of the cycle of birth and death. In the final section of the novel, the refrain, "We perished, each alone," is used in this manner. But the refrain can also become glib and lead to an adoption of a false

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 124.

2 Ibid., pp. 113-14.

attitude. It is conveyed through the mock-heroic compact between James and Cam to oppose their father. "But they vowed, in silence, as they walked, to stand by each other and carry out the great compact -- to resist tyranny to the death."¹ The falsity of this adopted attitude reveals itself gradually when at first Cam, and then James, come to respect their father. Similarly, in the first part of the novel, the phrase "someone has blundered", is repeated seven times. Again, the repetition involved in memory is also an important aspect of the novel. The refrains are echoed and repeated, producing a certain suggestivity, which in turn give a rich poetic element to the novel.

The peculiar use of imagery in To the Lighthouse evinces Virginia Woolf's faculty of creating new language-symbols to convey what is perceived. Her images, therefore, become an exact verbal equivalent for a precise emotion or a set of emotions. Her imagery possesses the enchantment of poetry which influences us deeply. The images that pass through her characters' minds belong rather to the general tradition of literature. The effect is of an insidious infiltration of tradition into the sensibility of characters. The effect is the same whether it is a straight description by the author, "So boasting

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 238.

of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by;"¹ or a presentation of mood, "... she stopped and heard dully, ominously, a wave fall, how it came from this : she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband;"² or a translation of ecstasy, "... just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly."³

The novel abounds in images of natural world which impart a lively freshness of poetry to it. Rose and Jasper, choosing jewellery for Mrs. Ramsay, are compared with "rocks trying to decide which tree to settle on".⁴ Lily's reaction to Tansley's taunting ("women can't paint") is also described in sentences saturated with natural imagery:

Why did her whole being bow, like corn
under a wind, and erect itself again
from this abasement only with a great
and rather painful effort?⁵

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 53.

2 Ibid., p. 55.

3 Ibid., p. 152.

4 Ibid., p. 116.

5 Ibid., p. 124.

The feelings are classified with the help of keen observation of nature. It not only lends a depth of appreciation to the narrative, but also a lovely poetic touch through its figurative suggestion. Nature, as a whole, haunts Mrs. Ramsay with her indications;

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus as for oneself.¹

The ordinary sight assumes the quality of an imaginative vision. The significance of its symbolical value lends a poetic touch to these lines which are reminiscent of Wordsworth.

The imagery of waves and sea is used lavishly in To the Lighthouse. Waves represent not only an outer phenomena, or a given mental state, but also symbolize a totality of experience. The image is used in different contexts, endowing a richness to it. In the first part of the novel the sound of the waves enact a background rhythm accompanying Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts, "so that the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again...."² But it may also take on a horrifying

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 91.

2 Ibid., pp. 19-20.

magnitude throwing her into an abysmal fear, "...this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror."¹

Through the image of the waves, psychological moods are represented poetically. The constant repetition of this image enriches meaning and resonance -- layers after layers appear suggesting a variety of emotions and moods, which help to produce the exact tone. The openness of emotional interpretations and their evocative presentation produce a poetic resonance. Mrs. Ramsay looks at her husband standing at the edge of the lawn, with pity and reverence;

...as a stake driven into the bed of a
channel upon which the gulls perch and
the waves beat inspires in merry boat-
loads a feeling of gratitude for the
duty it has taken upon itself of marking
the channel out there in the floods
alone.²

The solid and distinct comparison with stake envelops Mrs. Ramsay's feelings with a poetic delicacy. The swiftly moving language and the image of perched seagulls present a vivid picture of aloneness -- of being solitary --, yet strong in a very personal way. The whirling movement of the water is also depicted through the immediacy of the smooth lines.

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 20.

2 Ibid., p. 62.

As a novelist, Virginia Woolf is deeply conscious of the great possibilities of employing the poetic methods in her prose narratives. The ambivalence of the water-symbol in To the Lighthouse is richly poetic in associations, and permeates the novel on both the literal and figurative levels as scene and as metaphor. It also becomes a theme of the interpretation of consciousness and the external world. Lily and Mr. Banks walk every evening to the break in the thick hedge where they can see the bay:

They came there regularly every evening drawn by some need. It was as if the water floated off and set sailing thoughts which had grown stagnant on dry land.... Then, up behind the great black rock, almost every evening spurted irregularly, so that one had to watch for it and it was a delight when it came, a fountain of white water....¹

The landscape is very solidly depicted, exactly observed and described with a poetic flair. The exactness of expression reminds us of Crabbe's poetry. The sentences move with a sonorous and swift quality. The poetic effect of this passage depends on the simultaneous presence of a delicately proportionate sense of the landscape as object and, in relation to it a delicately exact sense of the character's moods as they change. The quiet, sloping dunes and the evening sky present an image of eternity, of a world at rest. The viewers are looking

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 26.

for a stable point outside themselves, which reminds them of their own mortality. Still they are drawn to it by its ability to give them a vision which extends beyond their personal lives -- the participation in perception makes one's world much broader and satisfying.

The familiar idea of mimesis, of holding a mirror up to nature, is again used in this novel, as it is employed throughout Virginia Woolf's prose-narratives. The image of mirror or reflecting pool is handled to illustrate the complex relationship between art and external reality which is bound up with the problem of the relationship between human nature and 'Nature'.¹ In Mrs. Dalloway it took the Wordsworthian form of a fusion between an old lady and a stream and water pump. Here, again, the terms are those coined and employed by the Romantic poets. Part six of the central section illustrates this idea. Spring is seen here as the time of growth, of hope and marriage. The oneness of human and natural worlds is indicated through Shelleyan images:

...it was impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules; or to resist the extra-ordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of

1 Allen McLaurin, Virginia Woolf : The Echoes Enslaved (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 196.

intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure.¹

Prue's death in childbirth bears out Blake's reservation on the Wordsworthian consonance between mind and nature. Things are even more out of joints than this, since the Great War kills Andrew Ramsay. Such unpleasant facts cannot be overlooked:

Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began?... That dream, then, of sharing, completing, finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath?²

Virginia Woolf has recreated and developed the poetic novel into a supremely important variety of modern art. The poetry of this novel emanates not only from the mood of the narrative, image-patterns, employment of symbols and metaphors, but also from the immediacy of the narrow frame-work -- the interplay of characters' reactions and passions, i.e., from their inner reality. She never tries to construct an Axel's Castle. For her, imagination is a means, not of constructing fantasy, but of constructing truth. In To the Lighthouse, the consciousness with

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 193.

2 Ibid., pp. 195-96.

its creative sensibility discovers a true picture of the world which can be shared by others. In Jacob's Room, the depth of Jacob's consciousness and his discovery of the fragmentation of life alienates him from other people; and in Mrs. Dalloway the shallow people, to hold on to their own sense of truth, destroy Septimus's more profound vision; but in To the Lighthouse the characters' personalities are more closely linked with their respective consciousness, so that a personal vision may be communicated, and the reality discovered by one consciousness may be discovered by another.

The poetic genius of Virginia Woolf blossoms forth in the characterization of Mrs. Ramsay, who is projected more as a symbol than an individual. She finds comfort in domesticity, where "custom crooned its soothing rhythm". Her character personifies a harmonious rhythm from which the suggestivity and lyricism of the novel emanate. She makes a positive effort to create these comforting social rhythms to save herself from drowning in the despair which an awareness of the deathly repetition can bring. This is what lies behind her deep feeling about an apparently trivial party:

Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody could do it, and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating,... life being now strong enough to bear her on again, she

began all this business, as a sailor not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea.¹

Mrs. Ramsay's intuition at once grasps the desolation of William Bankes, and she steers forward to save his dignity. This moment of her intense experience results in sharp and sudden recognition, and she tries to restore the balance. The slow-moving, deliberate rhythm of these lines underlines poetically the kaleidoscope of feelings. Her interest in immediate things enables her to grasp the rhythm of those things, which correspond to the overall rhythm of the novel. She sees the "first two quick strokes" of the lighthouse, but it is the long third stroke which modifies this repetition, and transforms it into a rhythm, for she "becomes" the third stroke:

...and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching then in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke.²

The semi-divine attributes of Mrs. Ramsay's character are mingled carefully with a pensiveness, a tragic sense

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 121.

2 Ibid., p. 90.

of life, suggesting a heavier, controlling gloom. She is beautiful,¹ graceful,² and exercises a feminine charm over the opposite sex.³ She is a more universal perceiver than Mrs. Falloway. Yet, like Mrs. Falloway, she loses that self which belongs to practical affairs. Her immediate fret and worries, her immediate surroundings disappear, and she shrinks into a "wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others."⁴ But in so shrinking, the range of experience becomes limitless. Her identification with trees and flowers is not an extension of the ego (as in Mrs. Falloway), but a dissolution of it. It offers a promise of union which is an ultimate fulfilment: there "rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bridge to meet her lover."⁵

The characterization of Mrs. Ramsay proves that Virginia Woolf has a skilled craftsmanship in language, an exactitude in arrangement of words, which, taken together, add to the poetic effusiveness of the novel. The poetry in this novel emerges from her deeply felt experience of life and an understanding of human nature.

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- 1 "The happier Helen of our days." (To the Lighthouse, p. 36). "...the torch of her beauty." (Ibid., p. 58).
 - 2 "The Graces assembling seemed to have joined hands in meadows of asphodel to compose that face." (Ibid., p. 49).
 - 3 "... had the whole of the other sex under her protection" (Ibid., p. 5).
 - 4 Ibid., p. 72.
 - 5 Ibid., p. 74.

The lucidity of Mrs. Ramsay's character is contrasted with the sharp-edged wit of detail and pointed expression in Mr. Ramsay, in whom we witness a different type of poetry. A different pattern of poetry emerges from a compact structure of ironic wit composed of contrasts and antitheses of character and episodes, morals and manners, and attitudes and values. Mr. Ramsay reveals the strength, even in external defeat, of some of the deepest instincts of human nature, such as, the instinct for family and its protection, often inhumanly ignored by utilitarian reformers and revolutionaries. This theme reminds us of Wordsworth's "Michael".

Mr. Ramsay is poetically portrayed as being emotionally barren and songless:

He shivered; he quivered. All his
vanity, all his satisfaction in his own
splendour, riding fell as a thunderbolt,
fierce as a hawk at the head of his men
through the valley of death, had been
shattered, destroyed. Stormed at by shot
and shell, boldly we rode and well,
flashed through the valley of death, volleyed
and thundered -- straight into Lily
Briscoe and William Benkes. He quivered;
he shivered.¹

His self-pity and conflicts show an inverted desire for participation in life. Fearing he will be forgotten, he wants to reach 'R' of his philosophical

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 42.

attainment.¹ Absorbed in his scientific pursuit for truth, he feels stupefied when encountered with the youthful participation in the "life" of Mrs. Ramsay. The sharp and abrupt tones of the above-quoted passage underline the fierceness of his crumpled vanity. "Hawk", "thunderbolt", "shell", "valley of death", etc., illustrate the enigma of an attempt to approach the inexpressible. The curve of these sentences consists of short, repeated phrases which culminate in a climax. The suggestiveness of this prose gives a poetic depth to it. Virginia Woolf does not supply direct statements; nor does she communicate personally. She starts off a process which amounts to the co-operative delineation of the poetic experience. The passage, referred to above, aptly illustrates it. The false vanity of Mr. Ramsay is reinforced by the repetition of "He shivered, he quivered", adding to the poetic qualities of the narration. What, in fact, he needs is sympathy:

It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first off all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life.²

1 "If Q then is Q -- R -- Here he knocked his pipe out, with two or three resonant taps on the ram's horn which made the handle of the urn, and proceeded. "Then R...." He braced himself. He clenched himself." (To the Lighthouse, p. 47).

2 Ibid., p. 52.

He cannot become part of a rhythm. He sees things from the outside, where the hateful aspect of repetition is most in evidence. His relationship with William Bankes becomes repetitive because it cannot develop into a rhythm. His academic work is a repetition of what he achieved when he was a young man. The stone urn besides which he conducts his philosophical speculations is a fixed point from which he moves away into the world of abstract speculation, and at the same time, of self-dramatisation. He stops for a moment by the urn, and knocks his pipe on its handle. Momentarily he sees the truth when he involuntarily sees the urn for its own sake:

The lizard's eye flickered once more. The veins on his forehead bulged. The geranium in the urn became startlingly visible and, displayed among its leaves, he could see, without wishing it, that old, that obvious distinction between the two classes of men; on the one hand the steady goers of superhuman strength who, plodding and preserving, repeat the whole alphabet in order... on the other the gifted, the inspired who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash -- the way of genius.¹

However, his honesty and unflinching courage in the face of the perennial mystery of life and the tragic incapability of the human mind are imaged as a desolate sea-bird:

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 48.

It was his fate, his peculiarity, whether he wished it or not, to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, and there to stand, like a desolate sea-bird, alone. It was his power, his gift, suddenly to shed all superfluities, to shrink and diminish so that he looked barer and felt sparer, even physically, yet lost none of his intensity of mind, and so to stand on his little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance, how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground we stand on -- that was his fate, his gift.¹

The rhetorical contents of these lines cannot be neglected, but the real poetic strain emerges from the deeper incarnations of meaning. Mr. Ramsay's egocentric view of loneliness, a sense of violation are not stated directly. Here Virginia Woolf has articulated the rhythm too far down in the unconsciousness to be apprehended directly.

As an artist Lily Briscoe is able to see the things as a whole, in a total perspective. She looks at the Ramsays and sees them as "being in love." Then they become:

...part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting universe which is the world seen through the eyes of love. The sky stuck to them; the birds sang through them. And, what was even more exciting, she felt, too, as she saw Mr. Ramsay bearing down and retreating, and Mrs. Ramsay sitting with James in the window and the cloud moving and the tree bending, how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach.²

1 To the Lighthouse, pp. 61-2.

2 Ibid., p. 66.

From this 'unreal' point of view life becomes like a wave, bearing into one curved whole separate incidents; from it we receive the unity and integration that we always seek just as Mrs. Ramsay's vision of fluidity and eternity of objects arises from a mistaken supposition of Paul and Minta's future happiness. Lily wonders: "Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one's perceptions, half-way to truth, were entangled in a golden mesh?"¹ The answer to this question inevitably hinges upon the truth, value and effectiveness of the short-sighted Mrs. Ramsay's vision. The poetry of the novel lies in this self-opposition. Lily, as an artist, tries to combine the short sight of Mrs. Ramsay and the long-sight of Mr. Ramsay. She senses the rhythm of the wave, but she can also see from a distance the formal pattern which waves make, "as the waves shape themselves symmetrically from the cliff top, but to the swimmer among them are divided by steep gulfs, and foaming crests."² Lily sees the beauty and completeness of things close at hand, but can also look into the distance and see shape and form. She has a myriad of impressions like Mrs. Ramsay, but like Mr. Ramsay can distance herself and see the form of things.

1 In the Lighthouse, p. 79.

2 Ibid., p. 236.

Virginia Woolf reaches the truth by indirect methods. There are innumerable points of view in the novel, none of which is quite simply the correct direction. Lily recognises this complexity, which she expresses as a need for "fifty pairs of eyes" to see the complete picture of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily, thus, shares with Mrs. Ramsay the habit of exaggeration, which is seen as an indirect way of reaching the truth. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's visions are complementary and Lily achieves a successful aesthetic fusion of impressionism and logic in her Post-Impressionist vision : "she saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral."¹

The form of the novel also helps us in understanding its underlying poetic tone. Virginia Woolf possesses the power of combination to an unusual degree. As a study of the relationship of time, death, nature, art, and as a study of personality, the novel emerges as a unified poetic whole, in which no cataloguing can be suggested. The middle section of the novel traces the effect of Mrs. Ramsay's illness and death from the point of view of a disembodied spectator in and around the house in Skye. The spectator reports fragments of the activities in the house, giving each movement and each

1 In the Lighthouse, p. 68.

reported remark a symbolic point. An immense darkness falls upon the house which devours objects and obliterates identities; this darkness is not creative dissolution but annihilation. Owing to the dominance of the atmosphere in the house, the incidents of the characters' lives are related in parentheses. By the use of parentheses Virginia Woolf attempts to achieve certain spatial aspects of the visual art. The use of square and round brackets is something more than simply a typographical device. The first and last sections, being parallel, form brackets around the central section. Throughout the novel smaller parentheses mirror this overall pattern; the book is made up of curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness. Within the "emptiness" of the central section, there are various parentheses which give a sense of the mere contingency of human life. Mrs. Ramsay's death is also conveyed parenthetically, as if not the incident but the consequences are important.

In the middle section of the novel Virginia Woolf attains new poetic heights. She is conscious of war and its dehumanising effects. The ability, shown in the first section, to use nature as a focusing symbol of the soul, revealing the creative harmony between what we see and what we seek to discover within ourselves, has been broken. The harmony was based upon a capacity for integration that has now been shattered. The world of battles now takes over. Even the landscape reflects the

scars of war. In the third section, we find some of the finest specimen of Virginia Woolf's poetic language. The beginning of this section is a reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's style in The Waves. The cataloguing of decay starts at once. Time passes and seasons change:

The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their leaves fly helter skelter until the lawn is plastered with them and they lie packed in gutters and choke rain pipes and scatter damp paths. Also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself....1

The juxtaposition of active nature and the gloomy stillness of the empty house emphasizes the destructive aspects of nature. The details are presented with a minute accuracy and a sombre detachment, which add to the suggestivity of the passage. The images of emptiness are repeated again and again:

What people had shed and left -- a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes -- those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated...2

Apropos of this, we may quote another example:

Nothing it seemed could break that image, corrupt that innocence, or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room, wove into itself the falling cries of birds, ships

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 167.

2 Ibid., p. 168.

hooting, the drone and hum of the fields,
a dog's bark, a man's shout, and folded
them round the house in silence.¹

The visual terms of the imagery, the lulling rhythm of the sentences and their music are carefully planned to enrich the feeling of the silent atmosphere. While the rhythm often creates a vibrant poetic resonance, sometimes it lapses into a mere device of story-telling :

So loveliness reigned and stillness,
and together made the shape of loveliness
itself, a form from which life had parted;
solitary like a pool at evening, far
distant, seen from a train window, vanishing
so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening,
is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though
once seen.²

The image of the rock-pool is taken up again after a few pages to indicate explicitly Virginia Woolf's concern with the way in which we perceive, or in Wordsworthian terms "half-creates" the eternal world. The importance of imagination in the interaction of the human and natural worlds is stressed: "In those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted."³ This free play of imagination is the first step towards artistic creation, which lends a creative-poetic charm to Virginia Woolf's works. Mrs. Ramsay transforms the skull hanging in the children's bedroom into a landscape

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 189.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 192-93.

just as she did earlier with the dish of fruit, giving a wonderful evocation of space which is related to that of a painting.

The time passes on and now it is summer. But the decay has become more prominent, the folds of shawl loosen and the rock is rent asunder.¹ The beauty is distorted, and we are compelled to think that the author is invertedly creating a replica of human situation in nature, which has lost its power of producing finer sensibility:

There was the silent apparition of an ashen-coloured ship for instance, come, gone; there was a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath. This intrusion into a scene calculated to stir the most sublime reflections and lead to the most comfortable conclusions stayed their pacing. It was difficult blandly to overlook them, to abolish their significance in the landscape; to continue, as one walked by the sea, to marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within.²

The house is left "like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it."³ The Shakespearean ~~cauzz~~ of the complexity and depth of human nature and life correspond to a Shakespearean development of language. Virginia Woolf's insight into

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 194.

2 Ibid., p. 195.

3 Ibid., p. 200.

the nature of the human mind, and into the relationship between the states of mind and the external world lend a deep poetic note to this novel.

Mrs. McNab hovers over the premises non-resistant to decay. Passive, devoid of the contemporary vision of Samson or Tirerries, she seems to be the embodiment of woman-kind without initial fertility of nature, and stumbles about life like a drifting ship. Just as the old woman in Mrs. Balloway 'becomes' the tree as she sings a song with an "absence of all human meaning", so the house-keeper in To the Lighthouse is at one with nature with nonsensical, rhythmical repetition:

...but now, coming from the toothless, bonneted, caretaking woman, was robbed of meaning, was like the voice of witlessness, humour, persistency itself, trodden down but springing up again, so that as she lurched, dusting, wiping, she seemed to say how it was one long sorrow and trouble, how it was getting up and going to bed again, and bringing things out and putting them away again.¹

The repetition may seem painful and hackneyed. But when she looks in the mirror she gains consolation through imagination and memory of another repetition, "looking sideways in the glass, as if, after all, she had her consolations, as if indeed there twined about her dirge some incorrigible hope."² Her face is twisted in the glass just like that of the mystic in the pool which he

1 To the Lighthouse, pp. 190-91.

2 Ibid., p. 191.

stirs. Whilst Mrs. McEab is immersed in the routine and comforting repetition of memory, the mystic has, perhaps, a vision of 'repetition' itself: "Meanwhile the mystic, the visionary, walked the beach, stirred a paddle, looked at a stone, and asked themselves "what am I?" "What is this?" and suddenly an answer was vouchsafed them..."¹ Thus we are shown a dramatic renewal of the house, focusing on the comic - epic figure of Mrs. McEab. The forces of annihilation are defeated by man's power and will to live. It is, indeed, hard to find anything in modern English prose which may surpass this part.

Part III of the novel poetically explored the relation of art to life in the knowledge of loss as well as the achievement of gain. The guests gather again, and Lily can hear the "voice of the beauty of the world."² The recovery of the life-ward impulse asserts itself in the sudden Shakespearean vitality of the language. This vitality, this rejuvenation of a sensuous wealth of living experience, manifests itself towards the end of the second section. The vitality of language-tones reminds us of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale". With its symbols, metaphoric language and impregnated diction, the Third Part gives a final touch to the poetry of this

1 To the Lighthouse, pp. 191-92.

2 Ibid., p. 207.

novel. The corresponding movements of those in the boat getting closer to the lighthouse, and of Lily getting closer to the solution of her aesthetic problem, amount to the poetic tension. The determining factor in each case is love; the "art" of life might perhaps be defined as order to the achievement of form in human relations. The poetry emerges from a perfect play of words and the ambivalent panoply of feelings, which is resolved in the ultimate vision.

Lily is unable to see any meaning in the things or people or activities round her in Mrs. Ramsay's absence. Her alienation is similar to that of Septimus Smith. Words and objects present themselves to her as nightmarishly disjointed symbols. Mr. Ramsay's self-pitying, self-dramatised mutterings of 'Perished' and 'Alone' live as fragments in her mind. She is unable to construct a sentence from them. She escapes Septimus's impasse because in her case these incomplete responses form an incipient state of creative awareness. For though she is frightened by her own weird thoughts and by the unreality of her surroundings, she is also excited by this disorientation, demanding as it does the construction of new images.

Only a poet can re-create the vital play of suddenly erupting feelings -- changing, vibrant and successive -- in a distinct, sharply focused light of

benevolent understanding. Every part of this classic poetic novel is relevant to every other part -- Ramsay's journey and Lily's painting become one and the same in their ultimate object. The enchanting splendour of this situation is subtly suggested, and Lily's painting becomes an imaginative expression of Mrs. Ramsay's personality. Mrs. Ramsay's absence now acts as an impetus for her discovery. Lily realises that fifty pairs of eyes would not be enough to see that one woman.¹ Once the process is begun, more and more impressions follow one another, replace one another, and thereby set up an echo, which chimed in the air and "made it full of vibrations."² The language is so close to the object that the two are identified in an exuberant poetic whole :

The sails flapped over their heads.
The water chuckled and slapped the sides
of the boat, which drowed motionless in
the sun. Now and then the sails rippled
with a little breeze in them, but the
ripple ran over them and ceased. The
boat made no motion at all.³

The quiet picture is drawn in Wordsworthian fashion. The unruffled waters carry forth the boat, and the wind is casually breezing past the sails. But the tranquility of nature soon changes into harsher rhythms of wind and speed:

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 289.

2 Ibid., p. 234.

3 Ibid., p. 237.

Yes, the breeze was freshening. The boat was leaving, the water was sliced sharply and fell away in green cascades, in bubbles, in cataracts. Cam looked down into the foam, into the sea with all its treasure in it, and its speed hypnotised her, and the tie between her and James sagged a little.¹

Virginia Woolf's imaginative sense of life lifts the scene into fantastic poetry. Nature now exercises a fundamental effect on human beings. Cam's awareness of her sagging tie with Jim suggests dimly the climax of the emotive journey to the lighthouse. In this last section, the states of mind are often depicted figuratively through natural phenomena. The language rhythms match the rhythms of the mental states:

And as sometimes happens when a cloud falls on a green hill-side and gravity descends and there among all the surrounding hills is gloom and sorrow, and it seems as if the hills themselves must ponder the fate of the clouded, the darkened, either in pity, or maliciously rejoicing in her dismay : so Cam now felt herself overcast, as she sat there among calm, resolute people and wondered how to answer her father about the puppy....²

The poetic tone of passages like these is obvious. The long rhythmic sentences add to the overall poetic atmosphere of the novel.

The journey to the lighthouse is considered as a voyage from egotism to impersonality. Inexorably fixed

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 241.

2 Ibid., p. 245.

above the waste of waters, it represents a vital synthesis of time and eternity, an objective correlative for Mrs. Ramsay's vision after whose death it is her meaning. Symbolizing both the Ramsays, the lighthouse shows Virginia Woolf's belief in the existence of certain basic masculine and feminine traits which are valuable to the opposite sex and contribute to a harmonious union. At the same time these androgynous traits enable an individual to deal with chaos and time. The escape from time occurs as a result of the subordination of, or release from egoism in various ways. The voyage to the lighthouse illustrates the difficulty of judging others and the way in which each new set of sensations has the power to alter a judgment. By its intermittent radiance, it represents the achievements of the civilized man in the surrounding darkness of eternal nature.

To the Lighthouse is often compared with W. B. Yeats' famous poem "Sailing to Byzantium", published in the same year. The Byzantine poem deals with the poet's quest for an artifice of eternity, his symbolic journey over water when as an old man with a tattered coat upon a stick he envisions sailing to seas to the holy city. These two works by such different artistic personalities share a striking number of spiritual and worldly concerns, including a central preoccupation with what is past, or passing, or to come. We may quote a few lines to illustrate it :

...Nancy, reluctantly, saw the whole world spread out beneath her, as if it were Constantinople seen through a mist, and then, however heavy-eyed one might be, one must need ask "Is that Santa Sophia?" "Is that the Golden Horn?"¹

Another aspect of Virginia Woolf's style, which lends a definite poetic charm to the novel, is her use of colour-symbolism. To the Lighthouse is a novel concerned with painting, and hence the use of colour is quite distinctive. In this novel the white colour symbolizes science and abstract thought. Pankes refers to be clothed in a white, scientific coat.² Lily sees Mr. Ramsay's works on 'subject and object' as a white scrubbed table.³ Red and brown appear to be the colours of individuality and egotism, while blue and green are the colours of impersonality. Blue also indicates distance and space. Until the end of the book, Mr. Ramsay visualizes the last, unattainable 'Z' as glimmering red in the distance. Lily, the impersonal artist, works with blues and greens. Mrs. Ramsay, who stands somewhere in between, is indicated on Lily's canvas as a triangular purple shape. While Lily is struggling unsuccessfully with her painting in Part One, she sees the colours as "bright, violet and staring white", but

1 To the Lighthouse, pp. 106-07.

2 Ibid., p. 32.

3 Ibid., p. 30.

just as she achieves her final vision, she notices that the lighthouse has "melted away into a blue haze." Yellow, in the novel, is a positive avoidance of logical meaning, in contrast to white which is a negative lack of colour. Virginia Woolf uses colour to convey something which can be described vaguely as an emotional equivalence, a subtlety in relationships, and this gives a poetic refinement of understanding to the novel.

To the Lighthouse creates a vivid impression of the spectacle of life and the world, or of life and the world as a spectacle, dazzling, yet strangely illusory. Therefore, to represent the gestures and the poses of mind and body, Virginia Woolf has to create a new language for herself -- a language which should penetrate the surface feelings, scepticism, ecstasy, bewilderment, artistic puzzles -- and reach the inner self, the moment from which all the poetry of heart arises. Her use of language initiates a poetry, not merely of gestures and attitudes, but also of mind and soul which cannot be paraphrased in simpler terms. Her imaginative use of language can be successfully compared with that of Shakespeare or D. H. Lawrence. For example:

The words seemed to be dropped into a well, where, if the waters were clear, they were also so extraordinarily distorting that, even as they descended, one saw them twisting about to make Heaven know what pattern on the floor of the child's mind.¹

Again,

Why, after all these years had that
survived, ringed round, lit up,
visible to the last detail, with
all before it blank and all after it
blank, for miles and miles?!

In the behaviour of Virginia Woolf's language, concept and intuition are one, and this poetically enriches her prose. But at the same time, the language has an external independent existence. The imagery and the thought coalesce harmoniously to produce a world of poetic exuberance and imagination.

To the Lighthouse may with justice be described as "an expanded metaphor", as Wilson Knight has described a Shakespearean play. Here the individual images have the same organic relationship with the allegory of the general theme that we find in Shakespeare's greatest plays. The themes of To the Lighthouse are those of the sonnets : time, beauty, the survival of beauty through the means of art, absence and death. We may quote from Shakespeare's sonnets to illustrate it:

Like as the waves make towards
the pebbled shore,

So do our minutes hasten to their
end.... (No. 60)2

1 To the Lighthouse, p. 249.

2 The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, ed. Dennis Allen (London : Nigtext Ltd., 1983), p. 293.

How with this rage shall beauty
hold a plea.

Whose action is no stronger than
a flower?.... (No. 65) 1

From you have I been absent in the
spring.

When proud-pied April, dress'd in
all his trim,

Hath put a spirit of youth in
every thing (No. 98) 2

It is in Shakespeare rather than in Bergson that the source of Virginia Woolf's themes is to be found. The influence of Bergson on Virginia Woolf is both limited and general. In To the Lighthouse the combination of autobiographical material with the poetic method of presentation and the larger structural pattern results in the final reconciliation between life and art. The rhythms and themes transcend plot and character, and appear at significant moments in the narrations, overshadowing the trivialities and pettiness of ordinary life. True, at some places she has used directly religious terminology, but the experience the author describes frequently occurs in non-religious poetry also.

1 The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, p. 300.

2 Ibid., p. 338.

In To the Lighthouse we are constantly aware of the variety of experiences that are fused together. The intensity of combination of experiences and the recognition of their implicit expression constitute the poetic basis of the novel. This intensity is captured by the clever use of language, subtle imagery and extensive symbolism. In the novel the window, the lighthouse, party and Lily's painting are used as structural symbols, along with the sea and the waves which permeate the narrative, enriching metaphor, if not creating structure, and suggesting the fullness of life and the immediacy of death.

To the Lighthouse is often interpreted in autobiographical terms. Like Wordsworth in Prelude, Virginia Woolf also imaginatively recollects the childhood experiences with a poetic vividness. As in the novels of George Eliot and Dickens, so in the writings of Virginia Woolf the memories of childhood and youth overflow the consciousness with unusual distinction. Though the recollected experiences form some of the substance of the novel, yet it is what is made of this substance that constitutes the poetic undercurrent of the novel. The early memories of Virginia Woolf's life become part of the developing aesthetic life delineated in the novel. However, To the Lighthouse is essentially a novel with some autobiographical hints.

She retains in her imagination some portions and associations of her early life, which in turn become objects of her contemplation, and are re-created as, and converted into, the new imaginative experiences which lend exquisite poetry to the novel.

Thus we see that Virginia Woolf has used numerous stylistic innovations, formal techniques, language - rhythm, symbolism and synthetic imagery to achieve the lyric balance and poetic excellence in To the Lighthouse. Her method is inherently poetic.¹ Her acute sensitivity, articulation, ability as a sonorous composer and the intensity of her vision make this novel essentially poetic both thematically and structurally. No wonder it ultimately achieves a lyrical quality scarcely seen in any other English novel.

¹ Frank W. Bradbrook, "Virginia Woolf : The Theory and Practice of Fiction", The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 7, ed. Boris Ford (London : Penguin Books, 1983), p. 35.

Chapter V

The Waves

The Waves is often considered as a great poem of incredible beauty. It is undoubtedly a prose-poem, a series of rhapsodies, linked and contrasted, expanding the lyrical note. In Virginia Woolf's writings, the poetic note is always present as an undertone. Inevitably the novel must be treated with utmost care so that the symbols and refrains, planned with extreme care and inter-relations, can be properly recognised. In The Waves, she is concerned with the poetic symbols of life -- the changing seasons, day and night, bread and wine, fire and cold, time and space, birth, death and change. Treated separately, these facts are the stuff of a novel; but treated collectively as symbols, they are the stuff of poetry. Naturally, Louis Kronenberger affirms: "In spirit, in language, in effect The Waves is -- not a poetic novel but a poem, a kind of symphonic poem with theses and thematic development, in prose."¹

The Waves poses many questions thematically universal. The problem of achieving a definite form is

¹ Louis Kronenberger, The New York Times Book Review (25 Oct., 1931), p. 5.

particularly stressed from many points of view. As in To the Lighthouse, the flux moves searchingly in a direction of permanence, so also in The Waves, published four years after, the characters long for artistic perfection. Bernard says:

I see him sunk in his low chair gazing at the fire which has assumed for the moment an architectural solidity. If life, he thinks, could wear that permanence, if life could have that order....¹

At the same time, Bernard is conscious of flux, disorder, annihilation and despair. All the six characters in the novel have their idiosyncrasies of nature, but all of them are haunted constantly by the fleeting vision of perfection of a still moment:

Then suddenly descended upon me the obscure, the mystic sense of adoration, of completeness that triumphed over chaos Nobody guessed the need I had to offer my being to one god; and perish, and disappear. His mallet descended; the vision broke.²

This epic theme is treated in a language at once marvellously accurate and subtly connotative. It is a true kind of poetry. The six imaginative creations are revealed at varying periods in their lives standing beyond time and seeing themselves within it. These six

1 Virginia Woolf, The Waves (New Delhi : E.L. Publications, 1979), p. 65.

2 Ibid., p. 37.

people may also be considered as the six facets of Samson Agonistes -- they have the glimpses of a vision, but do not have the faculties for embodying it; worldly temptations and personal agonies hinder their way. The only difference is that Samson's mainly physical torture has been shifted to the mental level.

This sense of awareness and a fidgety tension can also be traced in Yeats' Byzantium poems which celebrate the work of art as opposed to the work of nature. Neville, in the above-quoted speech, is also trying to achieve that edifice of permanence which ultimately resolves the conflict between nature and what is beyond nature.

The Waves is throbbing with a mystery which all the poets and philosophers have felt. From Jacob's Room onwards, the physical behaviour of her characters and outward phenomena are seen only as reflections in the moving mirror of consciousness. The immediate consciousness of experience is her theme; by a series of visual and aural images she snares in words an incommunicable secret. She has often been called a "metaphysical poet" who has chosen prose-fiction as her medium.¹

The Waves also deals with the organic development in the individual from childhood to manhood. This conception has been presented with a basic awareness of

¹ Gerald Bullitt, "Review", New Statesman and Nation (10 Oct., 1931), p. 10.

the capability of language. The Shakespearean creative use of language changes this novel into a work of poetry. Like The Prelude, "the mind of man" is the main region of this work :

How tired I am of stories, how tired I
am of phrases that come down beautifully
with all their feet on the ground! Also,
how I distrust neat designs of life that
are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper.¹

Or,

The crystal, the globe of life as
one calls it, far from being hard and cold
to the touch, has walls of thinnest air.
If I press them all will burst. Whatever
sentence I extract whole and entire from
this cauldron is only a string of six
little fish that let themselves be caught
while a million others leap and sizzle,
making the cauldron bubble like boiling
silver, and slip through my fingers.²

These passages are marked with desolation; the man and the world have shed their illusions and stand nowhere in their ultimate realization. The pure delicate sensibility found in the language, and the mood that it expresses, is a true basis of poetry. The novel is written in a style of sonorous music rather than of reason.

Like a psychologist, Virginia Woolf suddenly reveals to us in the piercing light of her poetic imagination things latent in the darker areas of

1 The Waves, p. 169.

2 Ibid., p. 182.

subconscious, hitherto unrealized by any power of explicit speech. She has synthesized modern psychological theories with a vein of rich poetry. For example, Rachel's angst dream, James Ramsay's behaviour with his parents, people's retention of their childhood impressions in old age are direct, artistic expositions of what we have learned from Freud.

However, when we talk of Virginia Woolf as a psychologist, the word needs enlargement. Her interest in the workings of the mind is accompanied by a sense of reverence, a recognition of the natural dignity of each man, a recognition of the mind as a creative power (the imagination) working on nature as nature works on it, and a recognition of unknown and mysterious depths in man and in the universe. Her sensitiveness results in grand poetic passages, which occur again and again in her prose-narratives. Some passages achieve the impact of painting by virtue of their concrete visual imagery:

...as the train passes by these red rocks, by this blue sea, the term, done with, forms itself into one shape behind me. I see its colour. June was white. I see the fields white with daisies, and white with dresses; and tennis courts marked with white. Then there was wind and violent thunder... Wind and storm coloured July.¹

1 The Waves, p. 46.

The passage very cleverly begins with particularizing everything separately, as red, blue, white, etc.. Coupled with alliteration of sounds, it presents a concrete word-picture. But suddenly the fabric shifts and the sounds of turmoil and upheaval dominate, suggesting the equally perturbed mental state of the speaker. "Violent", "wind", and "storm" suggest the disturbed picture which further reveals the ambiguity and indecision of Rhoda. When she complains, "Identity failed me", the whining tone of the narration reaches tragic dimensions. Likewise, in another passage we find a character's alienation gradually changing into a universal dilemma :

There is some flaw in me -- some fatal
hesitancy, which, if I pass it over,
turns to foam and falsity Am I too
fast, too facile? I do not know. I do
not know myself sometimes, or how to
measure and name and count out the
grains that make me what I am.¹

The imaginative embodiment of this universal experience, the exquisite sensibility and the beautiful prose make the poetry of this passage vivid. Virginia Woolf has a suddenness and precision of images which add to it. For example, there is the image of mind falling "like a chopper on a block."

Virginia Woolf's excellence lies in the poetic embodiment of experience, with remarkable vividness and

1 The Waves, p. 60.

precision. The ideas and their logical or associative evolution are often ingenious and subtle, fine-spun and intricate, like those in a poem by Tonne; but they are definite and exact. The nebulous moment is rendered with the sharpness of a poet :

But I am too nervous to end my sentence properly. I speak quickly, as I pace up and down, to conceal my agitation. I hate your greasy handkerchiefs -- you will stain your copy of Ion Jugh You are making phrases about Byron. And while you gesticulate, with your cloak, your cane, I am trying to expose a secret told to nobody yet....¹

The meaning and the experience are fused into one, giving birth to exquisite poetry. The six complementary personalities of The Waves illustrate their experiences again and again, till they are distilled and their true significance is understood years later. The significance of Bernard's gesture of liking Feville's poetry becomes clear later in the dinner scene :

We had the experience but missed the meaning.
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form.²

The characters often explore their own psyche in the creative relationship with the non-human universe, which

1 The Waves, p. 63.

2 The Dry Salvages, ll. 93-5, Four Quartets (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 39.

lends a poetic atmosphere to the novel. Among the six personalities, Susan, embedded in the country rhythm, feels a close affinity with nature. She feels one with nature : "I think sometimes (I am not twenty yet) I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn."¹ This identification with nature at once reminds us of Wordsworthian kinship with nature and his delicate sensitivity.

... well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.²

As a receptive sensationalist, Susan can indulge in pastoral pleasures like the Romantic characters. Like the Greek men and women in Jacob's Room, Susan does not want to lead an emasculated life. She wants natural life, and is not "afraid of the heat nor of the frozen winter."³ She hates sophistication, and is not ready to spend even a single night in London.⁴ Her recognition of an organic relationship with nature is described in

1 The Waves, pp. 70-71

2 Tintern Abbey, ll. 107-11, Lyrical Ballads with Few Other Poems (Bristol : Higgs and Gottle, 1907), p. 207.

3 The Waves, p. 18.

4 Ibid., p. 44.

straight, simple manner, which reminds us of Shakespeare's use of language, with an acute eye for minor details :

I like best the stare of shepherds met
in the road; the stare of gipsy women
beside a cart in a ditch suckling their
children as I shall suckle my children
....I shall have... a kitchen where
they bring the ailing lambs to warm in
baskets, where the beans hang and the
onions glisten.¹

Thus nature holds a promise of equanimity for Susan. The ordinary sights assume the quality of an imaginative vision. This sense of a living connection between human being and the natural universe rendered in simplified and chaste language imparts a poetic depth to the passage.

The texture of the novel has a seductive, poetic quality. On an extensive scale, Virginia Woolf has written "imagist poetry of the first order",² which is studded with golden notes. It is particularly found in those passages in which characters possessing basically a materialistic outlook draw analogies and images from a natural world. Jimmy, concerned with "gilt chairs" and ornamental halls, can communicate only on a physical level. But in her introspection, nature buds forth in

1 The Waves, p. 71.

2 Louis Kronenberger, The New York Times Book Review, p. 5.

its elementary form in her psychological process, and the "smooth - polished floors" are juxtaposed with the "unfurling ferns,"

I slide easily on smooth-polished floors,
I now begin to unfurl, in this scent, in
this radiance, as a fern when its curled
leaves unfurl. I stop. I take stock of
this world. I look among the groups of
unknown people. Among the lustrous green,
pink, pearl-grey women stand upright the
bodies of men. They are black and white;
they are grooved beneath their clothes
with deep ridges. I feel again the reflec-
tion in the window of the tunnel; it
moves.¹

The image of a fern with curled unfurling leaves is very apt, and produces the effect of something budding forth -- a flower blossoming -- to embrace new experiences of a phenomenon. Again, the lavish use of colours -- green, pink, pearl-grey, etc. -- suggests the accuracy of observation. The ease and movement of these lines make them highly poetic. The texture of the prose is a warp of sensory impressions woven into a woof of poetical abstraction.

Again, in continuation to the same speech, Jinny illustrates her excitement over an imaginary ball with overtones of sensual pleasure in natural phenomenon :

I flutter. I ripple. I stream like a
plant in the river, flowing this way,
flowing that way, but rooted, so that
he may come to me.²

¹ *The Waves*, p. 73.

² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

The wave-like rhythmic flow of the language recalls most strongly the superb prose of Rilke, while the sensuousness reminds us at once of Keats, particularly his "Ode to Autumn." The same is true of Jinny's poetic speech: "Silk is on my knee. My silk legs rub smoothly together. The stones of a necklace lie cold on my throat I am arrayed, I am prepared. This is the momentary pause; the dark moment. The fiddlers have lifted their bows."¹ Such sensuous overtones give a poetic dimension to Virginia Woolf's use of language.

The basic phenomenological impulse in The Waves is a compelling effort to subvert the subjective or the comfortably "mystical". For, as it is the discomfort -- highly Wordsworthian or Shelleyan -- of the first self at the "intransigence" of the non-human world which necessitates the procession of "selves", so Neville's crucial version of the man with his throat cut seems to "begin" the movement of the novel;

His blood gurgled down the gutter. His
jowl was white as a dead codfish. I
shall call this stricture, this rigidity,
'death among the apple trees' for ever.
There were the floating, pale-grey clouds;
and the immitigable tree; the implacable
tree with its greaved silver bark....
But we are doomed, all of us, by the apple
trees, by the immitigable tree which we
cannot pass.²

1 The Waves, p. 73.

2 Ibid., pp. 17-8.

The tone of this passage is inescapably related to one of the most important human realisations of things, recorded matchlessly in the English language, by Wordsworth's great "Ode" :

-- But there's a Tree, of many one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone :
The Pansy at my feet
Both the same tale repeat :
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?1

The pinprick, the sense of despair at the fecund exuberance of the world, is repeatedly delineated by Virginia Woolf in a very poetic way. The complexes of Rhoda and Louis are generic and deeply rooted in the psyche of their generation. Even as Rhoda goes to sleep at night, we see her tenuous touch with reality :

But what answer shall I give ? I am
thrust back to stand burning in this
clumsy, this ill-fitting body, to
receive the shafts of his indifference
and his scorn, I who long for marble
columns and pools on the other side of
the world where the swallow dips her
wings.2

Again,

I hate all details of the individual life
But I am fixed here to listen. An immense
pressure is on me A million arrows
pierce me. Scorn and ridicule pierce me.
I, who could beat my breast against the
storm and let the hail choke me joyfully,

1 "Ode on Intimations of Immortality", ll. 51-7,
English Verse, Vol. III, ed. W. Peacock (London :
Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 607-08.

2 The Waves, p. 76.

am pinned down here; am exposed. The
tiger leaps. Tongues with their whips
are upon me.¹

The clandestine and shifting rhetoricisms of Rhoda recall the poetic exuberance of Jimmy Porter, hero of Osborne's Look Back in Anger. This madness, dissatisfaction and an acute sense of inability to face the reality are also seen in the fragile, melodramatic, and excessively sensitive characters of Eugene O'Neill.

Rhoda's portrayal is enveloped with gloom. "I have no face. Other people have faces.... Their world is the real world.... They say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second."² The poignancy of this faceless alienation reminds us at once of Macbeth, and of Coleridge's mariner; like them, Rhoda's sense of guilt produces in her a revulsion against life itself, a nightmarish horror and disgust, which lead her to death-wish: "Alone, I often fall into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness."³ But what is nothingness? Like Beatelein's characters, she feels as if she were living in a billionium; the world is cornering her from every side and she is trying to find

1 The Mayor, p. 76.

2 Ibid., p. 31.

3 Ibid.

a way out of her tesseract.¹ It is this perception of things below the conscious level, of universality in particularity and of the gravity of emotions which makes Virginia Woolf's narration highly suggestive and poetic.

When Rhoda faces Miss Lambert, she does have some moments of freedom :

"When Miss Lambert passes," said Rhoda, "talking to the clergyman, the others laugh and imitate her hunch behind her back; yet every thing changes and becomes luminous.... Wherever she goes, things are changed under her eyes; and yet when she has gone is not the thing the same again? ... and when she comes to the pond, she sees a frog on a leaf, and that will change.... when Miss Lambert passes, she makes the daisy change; and everything runs like streaks of fire when she carves the beef."²

This detailed metamorphosis is rendered in poetic prose replete with suggestive associations. The imagery used is loaded with romantic, sensuous overtones. The sudden, strange and beautiful release of the spring of love again reminds us of Coleridge :

A spring of love gushed from my heart
And I blessed them unaware...
The self-same moment I could pray.³

But again like the mariner, Rhoda is never entirely free; the agony returns again and again, and

1 Albert Belyaev, The Ideological Struggle and Literature (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1979), pp. 136-7.

2 The Waves, p. 32.

3 Coleridge, "The Ancient Mariner," ll. 264-68, Frost's Ballads with few other Poems, p. 25.

the nightmare states of horror and sense of unreality sharpen. Her kinder sentiments find no outlet :

I will bind flowers in one garland and
clasp them and present them -- Oh ! to
whom? There is some check in the flow
of my being; a deep stress presses on
some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some
knot in the centre resists.... I faint,
I fail.... To whom shall I give all
that now flows through me, from my warm,
my porous body? I will gather my
flowers and present them -- Oh ! to whom?

The question, "Oh ! to 'whom?', is almost an agonized scream of loneliness. Her fruitfulness is obstructed. The supple, sonorous language of these lines is like a blank verse poem without formal line distinction. Thus Rhoda becomes a symbol of complex and subtle poetry with a more searching insight into the human mind and situations. This aspect of her characterization may be compared with Conrad's central figure in The Shadow Line. The essential interest in both the works is psychological. Virginia Woolf knows, like Coleridge, how to make use of vagueness; our vague fears are unmanageable, and hence powerful.

Rhoda's facelessness of being is asserted more and more in different contexts : "I am like the foam that races over the beach or the moonlight that falls arrow-like here on a tin-can, here on a spike of the

1 The Waves, p. 41.

mailed sea holly, or a bone or a half-eaten boat. I am whirled down caverns, and flap like paper against endless corridors, and must press my hand against the wall to draw myself back."¹ The visual images of foam and moonlight scattered haphazardly and the images of decay cluster round Rhoda. The images of rushing foam, and of sharp oblique moon-rays brightening some thrown away objects, which also suggest dilapidation, complete the picture of isolated rampage, mental as well as physical. The apparent desolation and disarray of Rhoda's personality at once remind us of Eliot's imagery in "The Hollow Men":

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.²

Images of this type give a poetic loftiness to the novel. Even Bernard becomes pensive, "when my voice is silent you will not remember me, save as the echo of a voice that once wreathed the fruit into phrases."³

Virginia Woolf's poetic mode of comprehension presents clearly the barrenness of Rhoda's spiritual state :

1 The Waves, p. 93.

2 The Hollow Men (Part III) ll. 39-44, Selected Poems : T. S. Eliot (London : Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 78.

3 The Waves, p. 96.

Yes, between your shoulders, over your heads, to a landscape, to a hollow where the many-backed steep hills come down like birds' wings folded. There, on the short, firm turf, are bushes, dark leaved, and against their darkness I see a shape, white, but not of stone, moving, perhaps alive. But it is not you, it is not you, it is not you; not Percival, Susan, Jinny, Neville or Louis. When the white arm rests upon the knee it is a triangle; now it is upright -- a column; now a fountain, falling. It makes no sign, it does not beckon, it does not see us.¹

The whole passage assumes many imagistic forms -- steep hills compared with folded wings of birds, column and fountain, etc. Underlying all of them are the two main tokens of spiritual failure -- neutrality and separation. Such poetic passages place Virginia Woolf among the great poets and dramatists of the 20th century.

The Waves is lit with a unique splendour of poetry. In the manner of serial music, each set of monologues by the six characters begins with a speech by Bernard. The fifth section starts with the news of Percival's death -- Percival the silent, physically impressive character whose nearly Sartrean role in The Waves is to be seen by the others. "But look", says Neville, seeing Percival in the school chapel, "he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a life-time."² And the lonely

1 The Waves, p. 99.

2 Ibid., p. 26.

Louis, in his vision of fields and grass and sky, sees that "it is Percival I need; for it is Percival who inspires poetry."¹ As the figure who is resplendently there, both conscious and yet definitely the object of all other consciousnesses in the book, Percival is necessarily the inspirer of poetry as transaction between the inner and the outer worlds. The poetic sensitivity of Virginia Woolf reaches its acme in the mute creation of Percival, who is mute since the fullness of his presence in his own body is a plenum of self-consciousness which does not require the kind of speech the others constantly perform -- their continual effort at pontification, or bridge-building between consciousness and experience. Neville notes it at the crucial dinner-party in section IV, "without Percival there is no solidity. We are silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background."²

Much in the manner of the window-turned-mirror in the first chapter of To the Lighthouse, Percival by his presence organizes the other six into a "party" in section IV, and again organizes them by his absence in the final gathering in section VIII. Bernard justly realizes that Percival represents the unity between

¹ The Waves, p. 29.

² Ibid., p. 87.

subject and object : "You have gone across the court, further and further, drawing finer and finer the thread between us. But you exist somewhere. Something of you remains. A judge. That is, if I discover a new vein in myself I shall submit it to you privately. I shall ask, what is your verdict? You shall remain the arbiter."¹ Here we find not only a vision but also the perfection of Virginia Woolf's lyric method which is devised to master the particular suffering and dissolve it into universal realizations. The passage is an example of the rhythm and texture of music; combined with her swift prose, it achieves the expressive intensity of poetry. The same poetic strain can be found in Bernard's summing up of the final gathering of the six in Hampton Court which is also an immensely poignant coda to the novel's total impact: "We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget."² For the body is at once the body of the dead Percival, unattainable to these modern children -- the stunted corpses of each one's potential self -- and, of course, the shattered and diminishing continuity of the six sensibilities taken as a single gestalt.

The news of Percival's death, coming soon after the dinner-scene, creates a dramatic catastrophe.

1 The Waves, p. 110.

2 Ibid., p. 196.

Deville is shattered, but at the same time he is conscious, like Prufrock, of the sneering world, "Now I say there is a grinning, there is a subterfuge. There is something sneering behind our backs."¹ Again, like Prufrock, he is hesitant and dubious of the smallest action, as memories haunt him and old associations recur; "I will stand for one moment beneath the inimitable tree, alone with the man whose throat is cut, while down-stairs the cook shoves in and out the dampers."²

Virginia Woolf's portrayal of this feeling can be compared with the imagery of futility and darkness found in Wordsworth and Shakespeare. There is a sense of lost bearings, the landmarks gone in Virginia Woolf as much as in the last stanza of Wordsworth's "The Reverie of Poor Susan";

She looks, and her heart is in heaven : but
they fade,
The mist and the river, the hill and the shade;
The stream will not flow, and the hill will not
rise,
And the colours have all passed away from her
eyes;
Or, in "Guilt and sorrow",
the distant spire,
which oft as he looked back had fixed his eye,
Was lost, though still he looked, in the black
sky.

1 The Waves, p. 108.

2 Ibid.

3 "The Reverie of Poor Susan", ll. 13-16, The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London : Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 188.

Perplexed and comfortless he gazed around,
And scarce could any trace of man descry,¹

Examples of similarly acute hopelessness can be quoted from Shakespeare also. For example :

O ! reason not the need; our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous;
Allow not nature more than nature needs
Man's life is cheap as beast's.²

On the other hand, Bernard's sorrow is balanced by the birth of his son. He is not "going to lie down and weep away a life full of care". He considers Percival a judge of his own personality, but the question of "how long"³ haunts him. This conflict between life and death, accident and rebirth has been heightened to poetic tension in Bernard's personality. This duality is presented with a mastery over language-tones, sometimes mock-heroic :

I should be able to place him in trifling
and ridiculous situations.⁴

Sometimes the language-tones are almost soothing in their realization of a great loss :

1 "Guilt and Sorrow", ll. 21-5, The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, p. 24.

2 King Lear, II, iv, 262-65. The Arden edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (London : Methuen & Co., 1973), p. 93.

3 The Waves, p. 111.

4 Ibid., p. 110.

Let them lay to rest the incessant activity of the mind's eye, the bandaged head, the men with ropes, so that I may find something universal beneath. Here are gardens and Venus among her flowers; here are saints and blue madonnas.¹

These passages are more or less shorn of imagery. The chastity of rhythm creates an aura of sublime poetry.

In the monologue of Rhoda, Virginia Woolf introduces a new complaining tone of skepticism and nihilism: "All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely?"²

For a moment we wonder if we have heard those words before. Then slowly we remember that they are the very words Rhoda had used in her childhood years before. Just because Virginia Woolf does not remind us directly of that, but leaves it to us to recognize like a returning tune, we are enchanted, and in this joy of reception lies one of the secrets of Virginia Woolf's poetic charm. The symbolic lines occur like Wagnerian leit-motif.

But in another instance, the alliteration and poetic rhetoricism mask a swift hatred for mankind,

¹ The Waves, p. 111.

² Ibid., p. 113.

"I am alone in a hostile world. The human face is hideous."¹ In the following lines publicity and violence are compared with a stone which can be "dashed" on the rocks. The image poetically conveys the violent mood of the speaker. But inspite of this vehemence, some lines enchant us by their sheer melody and beauty : "There are then warm hollows grooved in the heart of the uproar; alcoves of silence where we can shelter under the wing of beauty from truth which I desire."² The line suggests an oasis of feeling with a poetic ease. But this vision is momentary and dark clouds on the conscience begin to reappear:

There shall I recover beauty, and impose
order upon my raked, my dishevelled
soul. But what can one make in loneliness?
Alone I should stand on the empty grass
and say, Rocks fly; somebody passes with
a bag; there is a gardener with a wheel-
barrow. I should stand in a queue and
smell sweat, and scent as horrible as
sweat; and be hung with other people like
a joint of meat among other joints of
meat.³

The awareness of alienation and semi-absorption in daily routine arise a sordidness and revulsion in the speaker. The sick and neurotic images of this passage ("like a joint of meat;" "scent as horrible as sweat")

1 The Waves, p. 113.

2 Ibid., p. 114.

3 Ibid., p. 115.

remind us at once of the imagery of Eliot's earlier poems. For example :

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the
window-panes,

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on
the window-panes

Licked its tongue into the corners of the
evening

Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,

Let fall upon its back the soot that falls
from chimneys....¹

Virginia Woolf here creates a poetry of a different zone of consciousness -- a consciousness which has committed the sin of indifference earlier, and now cannot escape. The horror of the situation is conveyed through many similes, metaphors and images.² The novelist presents through a careful choice of words repugnance ("slis shoes"), pettiness ("little bags"), hackneyed meaningless craze for fashion ("clean-shaven cheeks"), reckless whiling away of time ("swaying and opening programmes"), animalism ("walruses stranded on rocks"), incapacity for vision ("like heavy bodies incapable of waddling to the sea"), and an utter hopelessness ("...we are too heavy, and too much dry shingle lies between us and the sea. We lie gorged with food, torpid in the heat"). But the ultimate realization eludes,

1 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 11. 15-19,
Selected Poems : T. S. Eliot, pp. 11-2.

2 The Waves, p. 115.

"Like' and 'like' and 'like' -- but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?"¹

Among other characters, this attitude is shared by Louis, who haphazardly draws a catalogue of various minor details, and in a phrase, reminding us of Keats, says, "I am half in love with the typewriter...."² His ambitions sack and his awareness of "and in view" lapses into repetitive devices,³ and ultimately becomes pessimistic; ".... and take my cup of tea and accept also my favourite biscuit, then I shall fall like snow and be wasted."⁴ The image of snow is self-sufficing but evanescent. The inconsequence which disturbs nobody and its commonplaceness lead us to a deep realization.

Virginia Woolf has used every opportunity to illustrate the moments poetically. Louis brings a poetry book and reads through it. But the repetition⁵ of the same lines.

O western wind, when wilt thou blow,
That the small rain down can rain?

1 The Waves, p. 116.

2 Ibid., p. 119.

3 Ibid., p. 120.

4 Ibid., p. 121.

5 Ibid., pp. 43, 44 and 45.

gives a complete understanding of Louis's fixations, generic complexes and ambitions. By a poetic depiction of human psyche, the hidden corners of Louis's subconscious are laid bare. The painting of the environment is a scaling down of Joycean architectonics, while the painting of the sensibility tends to be Proustian. Yet Virginia Woolf refracts the sensation efficiently through a tense awareness and a synthesis of objects and impressions creating exquisite poetry in her writings.

All six persons in The Waves are psychically conscious of the moment of release in their personal ways. For Bernard it may be words; for Susan, pastoral pleasures and country rhythms; for Jimmy the life of her sensuous body; for Louis, a consciousness of humiliations and fanciful traditional archetypes; for Neville, a concentrated inwardness; and for Rhoda her own solitude. We watch them unfolding and are aware of the silence beneath their speech, movement without action and the flickering of the innermost flame of personality. But all of them strive to achieve an ideal poetic perfection; a stillness where they can coalesce everything with everything, which can unify the being itself. Susan says:

How strange the little heaps of sugar
look by the side of our plates. Also the
mottled peelings of pears, and the plush
rims to the looking-glasses. I had not
seen them before ... something irrevocable
has happened. A circle has been cast on
the waters; a chain is imposed.¹

1 The Waves, p. 102.

The purely lyric movement of this passage, with its tentative rhythm, is natural in its themes and images -- its subject being the immediate apprehension of a timeless reality, felt and remembered in time. This moment of release from the deadening feeling of meaningless sequence into the "moment of being" is poetically presented. One suddenly feels at home, accepting the transitory relationships : "For one moment only", said Louis, "Before the chain breaks, before disorder returns, see us fixed, see us displayed...."¹ It is not a moment that can be held, though it can be remembered. It is a moment of recognition and then revelation. It is a moment which happens unexpectedly without the mind preparing itself, or making an effort, "...now the circle breaks. Now the current flows.... Their hearts pound and churn in their sides...."² The visual impact is tremendous and we feel as if we were reading a book of poetry. The vivaciousness and animal concentration are insisted upon again: "their hair shines lustrous. Their eyes burn like the eyes of animals brushing through leaves on the scent of the prey. The circle is destroyed. We are thrown asunder."³

Louis says : "I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair.... The circle is unbroken;

1 The Waves, p. 102.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

the harmony complete. Here is the central rhythm; here the common mainspring. I watch it expand, contract; and then expand again. Yet I am not included."¹ This is exactly the kind of passage which reminds us of Virginia Woolf's conception that a poetic novel has the "power of music, the stimulus of sight," and above all, "the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine."² The central idea of the passage is suggested rather than explained to us, which adds to the poetic content of the novel.

The last section of the novel is summed up by Bernard in an Italian monologue. He is now tired of words and somewhat sombre:

How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper.³

Bernard's humility is a stepping-stone for his realization of faith, "I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those accents of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably."⁴ The juxta-

1 The Waves, pp. 67-8.

2 "The Narrow Bridge of Art", Collected Essays, Vol. II, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), p. 229.

3 The Waves, p. 169.

4 Ibid.

position of the hubbub of normal life and the realization of a higher design remind us of Eliot's poetry. For example:

And an old man driven by the Trades
To a sleepy corner,

Tenants of the house,

Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.¹

Bernard's final ecstatic resolve to assert the human, to fling himself unvanquished and unyielding against death itself is followed by the stunning line:

"The waves broke on the shore."

The nature of these italicized words is neither the sympathetic nature of the pastoral, nor it is malevolent; but is equally anthropomorphic contrary to a view like Gloucester's "As flies to wanton boys...." It is rather the nature of sublime and self-sufficient inhumanity which finds articulation in the dirge in Cymbeline, or in Sartre's conception of the forbidding and impenetrable être-en-soi. It is simply and sublimely irrelevant to Bernard, as Bernard is to it, and therein lies its enormous power.

The Waves significantly presents man in the midst of things; man set upon by things, man confused, facing that inner real self of whose existence he feels sure. Whereas the Psalmist turned outward to God and

¹ "Gerontion", ll. 72-5, Selected Poems : T.S. Eliot, p. 33.

querried: "that is man that thou art mindful of him", Virginia Woolf's characters turn to that inward self and ask the universal questions. Therefore the book, based as it is essentially on the elemental dualism of reality, becomes the eternal drama of subject and object, of the inner and the outer, of the eternal and the flux. Obviously there is that something in The Waves "in comparison with which symbolism appears a mere makeshift."¹

Symbols are the life-blood of poetry, and The Waves is the richest novel of Virginia Woolf as far as symbolism is concerned. Her symbols are, in a way, analogous to the use of musical themes. They are never casual, but planned with utmost care, and some of them are of universal application, such as laurels for Triumph, Violets for Death, Snails for Self-seclusion. Some of the symbols are personal ones for certain characters due to some experience in childhood. The "inimitable tree" which Neville could not pass is such a symbol. As a child he had overheard the cook speaking of a man whose throat had been cut, while he was looking at an apple tree. And consequently the tree becomes a symbol of objects which he cannot surmount. Virginia Woolf never explains, or reminds us of, these

¹ Edwin Muir, "Review", Bookman (New York : December, 1931), pp. 362-67.

symbols, but leaves them to recur and to be recognized exactly like the Wagnerian leit-motif, like a returning tune, enchanting us.

Virginia Woolf has taken as the symbol of her theme the flux and reflux and the strange purposelessness of the sea, as viewed from above and from a distance. This symbol continually cuts across the vision, intruding into the imagery its battering restlessness, its unplumbed mobility, and its incessant renewal of shape and energy. The sea is a symbol which links her books together. It is a richly complex symbol which enhances the beauty and poetry of the novel :

Behind it roars the sea. It is beyond
our reach. Yet there I venture.
There I go to replenish my emptiness,
to stretch my nights and fill them fuller
and fuller with dreams.¹

It is the sea of unattainable perfection, like the rose-garden of Four Quartets. Each individual discovers moments of bright refuge in his own rose garden/sea. But such moments of ecstasy and sharp realization of disillusionment are abrupt and short-lived. The characters themselves are aware of their fragile nature. In her aside with Louis, Rhoda says:

The flames of the festival rise
high. The great procession passes,
flinging green boughs and flowering
branches. Their horns spill blue
smoke; their skins are dappled

1 The Waves, p. 99.

red and yellow in the torch-light.
They throw violets. They deck the
beloved with garlands and with laurel
leaves, there on the ring of turf
where the steep-backed hills come
down. The procession passes. And
while it passes, Louis, we are aware
of downfalling, we forebode decay.
The shadow slants. We who are
conspirators, withdrawn together to
lean over some cold urn, note how the
purple flame flows downwards.¹

The ornamental and fanciful Dickensian imagery is extremely poetic. In its completeness the passage is a poem on alienation. In it the suggestive, qualitative and categorical awareness of two simultaneous actions, the passing of procession and its own downfall -- the procession moves towards the realm of phenomenal warmth and light, and then it goes towards the realm of cold conspiracy and density -- presents a moral and spiritual pull which amounts to poetic tension. The Heraclitean "up" and "down" reveals the deep spiritual dimension of the seemingly superficial alienation of Rhoda and Louis. Throughout the novel the suggestions of unresistance in Rhoda's monologues ("withdrawn together to lean over some cold urn" etc.) are clearly symbolic of her mental states.

In another context Louis says : "I woke in a garden, with a blow on the nape of my neck, a hot kiss, Jinny's; remembering all this as one remembers confused cries and toppling pillars and shafts of red and black

1 The Waves, pp. 100-01.

in some nocturnal conflagration."¹ This garden is at once traditional and mysterious. The colours which he associates with the conflagration are aggressive, sharp and poignant, matching his mood of hatred and bitterness. The garden here is a symbol of beauty and natural love where Jinny implants him first innocent kiss. The depth of his emotions and heartfelt anguish are very profound. There is a certain rhythm in the lines that guarantees a smooth flow of words coming straight from the heart :

I am for ever sleeping and waking. Now
I sleep; now I wake. I see the gleaming
tea-urn; the glass cases full of pale -
yellow sandwiches; the men in round
coats perched on stools at the counter;
and also behind them, eternity. It is
a stigma burnt on my quivering flesh by
a cowed man with a red-hot iron. I
see this eating-shop against the packed
and fluttering birds' wings, many feathered,
folded, of the past. Hence my pursed
lips, my sickly pallor....²

The tranquil lull of earlier lines soon changes into the harsher tones of "gleaming tea-urn", "pale-yellow sandwiches", and "the eternity" is evoked. The clever image of "quivering flesh being burnt by a cowed man" is dreadfully alive. The juxtaposition of past with present in itself becomes a symbol of an unstated idea, and in this respect Virginia Woolf comes close

1 The Waves, p. 69.

2 Ibid.

to poets like Yeats, so different otherwise in medium and expression. That Virginia Woolf exactly does is to find a possible avenue of escape or liberation from the pain and suffering that attends human life. Again, the concern with what the imagination may or may not be able to do, in relation not only to the fact of suffering but also to the human capacity to live and enjoy, is delineated poetically. In this testing of the capabilities of the imagination Virginia Woolf seems to arrive, very much like Keats' "Ode to A Nightingale", somewhere near the kind of distinction Coleridge makes between the Fancy (which cheats) and the Imagination (which offers truthful insight into a given real state of things).

The wave is used in varied circumstances, and suggests varied states of emotions and thoughts. As it occurs, it has the power to hold the earlier associations together. When Neville leaves his poems with Bernard, he feels spiritually crushed and his emotion is conveyed in a highly poetic way:

Like a long wave, like a roll of heavy
waters, he went over me, his devastating
presence -- dragging me open, laying bare
the pebbles on the shore of my soul. It
was humiliating; I was turned to small
stones.¹

The impression of being shattered in every way is conveyed aptly through the poetic phrases like "laying

1. The Waves, p. 64.

bare the pebbles," "small stones," etc. The passion this passage deals with approximates to a poetic tension. In another passage the "gull on the wave" becomes a symbol of ease, naturality and mobility of character : "Jinny rides like a gull on the wave, dealing her looks adroitly here and there, saying this, saying that, with truth. But I lie; I prevaricate."¹

We find another example of beautiful, poetic imagery : "we will gallop together over desert hills where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire. Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth, I throw my violets, my offering to Percival."² We are astonished by the sheer poetic beauty of the passage. The verse-like rhythm of the beautiful lines culminates in figurative waves, suggesting a universal quality, almost a medium of communication to the dead through the waters of life.

In some passages the waves are considered to be something solid and subtle than the inconsequent cries of human beings; "Yet these roaring waters," said Neville, "upon which we build our crazy platforms are more stable than the wild, the weak and inconsequent

1 The Waves, p. 76.

2 Ibid., p. 117.

cries that we utter when, trying to speak, we rise....¹
Waves also suggest the impetuous nature of objects, and their continuous ruthlessness, obsession and engulfing power. Louis says: "Now the current flows. Now we rush faster than before. Now passions that lay in wait down there in the dark weeds which grow at the bottom rise and pound us with their waves."²

The images of sunshine, rocks, foam, waves and sea-shore occur constantly and by their repetition take the form of a symbol imparting a profundity to the poetic aspect of the novel: "I see rocks in bright sun-shine. I cannot take these facts into some cave and, shading my eyes, grade their yellows, blues, umbers into one substance.... I am going to be buffeted; to be flung up, and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea."³
The passage is truly poetic. The subtle changes of tone, and the mellow sonorous sounds make it highly suggestive. The natural phenomena is often used to illustrate the mental states of characters. For example: "Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far every time the door opens. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rim of the rocks with whiteness."⁴

1 The Waves, pp. 98-9.

2 Ibid., p. 102.

3 Ibid., p. 125.

4 Ibid., p. 77.

Virginia Woolf is acutely conscious of the transitoriness of human life, yet somehow she believes in its successive continuity. In The Waves she has artistically resolved this seeming contradiction between the flux and mutability of life, and the constancy of reality, through her suggestive and excessively poetic use of symbols. The sea and the associated symbols suggest a cluster of ideas very much like the tower of Babel. These symbols are rich in association and evoke tradition and heritage as well as contemporary comparisons. These richly complex symbols enhance the poetic beauty and richness of the novel.

Yeats remarks that the soul moves among symbols and unfolds in symbols, when trance or madness or deep meditation has withdrawn it from every impulse but its own. Virginia Woolf has a similar mystical experience when she looks at the marshes out of her window at Rodmell.¹ She admits that there is an essence of reality in life, which she has not realized earlier. She explains what she means by reality at another place;

Often down here I have entered into a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat; of great agony once; and always some terror; so afraid one is of loneliness; of seeing to the bottom of the vessel. That is one of the experiences I have had here in some Augusts; and got then to a consciousness of what I call 'reality'; a thing I see

¹ A Writer's Diary, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Triad Grafton, 1985), p. 132.

before me : something abstract; but
residing in the downs or sky; beside
which nothing matters; in which I shall
rest and continue to exist. Reality I
call it. And I fancy sometimes this is
the most necessary thing to me : that
which I seek.¹

The similarity between this experience and what
Wordsworth declares in "Tintern Abbey" is striking :

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round oceans and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of men;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts,
And rolls through all things.²

The relevance of this passage to the novel becomes
apparent when we realize that Virginia Woolf is attempt-
ing to convey her mystic experience with reference to
whole life through symbolic gestures which make the
novel poetic.

In The Waves, as Allen McLaurin says, "we see
things in a half-light, as if beneath waves. Our
vision seems to pierce through thick air as the light
changes and objects lose their familiar contours."³
For example;

1 A Writer's Diary, ed. Leonard Woolf, p. 132.

2 "Tintern Abbey", ll. 93-102, Lyrical Ballads with
Few Other Poems, p. 207.

3 Allen McLaurin, Virginia Woolf : The Echoes Enslaved
(Cambridge : University Press, 1973), p. 79.

"look", said Rhoda; "listen. Look how the light becomes richer second by second, and bloom and ripeness lie everywhere; and our eyes, as they range round this room with all its tables, seem to push through curtains of colour, red, orange, amber and queer ambiguous tints, which yield like veils and close behind them, and one thing melts into another."¹

The very first lines of the novel illustrate some symbols which can be considered as key-metaphors in understanding the six characters. Bernard, as he wakes, sees a ring suspended above him, quivering and hanging in a loop of light. The ring embodies the concept of eternity, and the loop of light symbolizes his capacity to visualize. Neville sees a globe "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."² It is a vision of the intellect, capable of grasping things in their entirety against their perspective, the "hill". Louis hears something stamping; "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps."³ Louis is accordingly chained to the complexes of his birth. But inspite of his acute sense of inferiority, he has characteristic leanings to break free and push forward. Rhoda hears the cheep-chirp of a solitary sparrow; a sound which asserts the timid feminine nature of a romantic dreamer, conscious of her own solitary insubstantiality. Susan sees a slab of pale yellow spreading

1 The Waves, p. 96.

2 Ibid., p. 6.

3 Ibid.

away till it meets a purple stripe, which, in a way, suggests basic elemental rhythms of life. Jinny, on the other hand, seems almost poetic in her vision of a "crimson tassel twisted with gold threads."¹ Unlike Susan who is elemental and solid, Jinny is a feather-headed creature, who is all body and no soul. Her body lives a life of its own "in the great society of bodies."² She wants to decorate and worship her body. She is conscious of the "heat and rapture" that bodies communicate.³ The red and gold colours of her vision suggest aggressive passion and pleasure-seeking tendency. Thus we find a complexity in the symbolic pattern of The Waves, which elevates the novel to the level of sheer rhythmic poetry. The relationship between these characters is indicated by their first speech and by the different colours used by them.

The life-sketch of six characters of The Waves is treated in different sections of the novel. The lyrical sections preceding these are intensely poetic. The general and detailed symbolism of these nine interludes produces a dramatic effect. The interludes are a detailed metaphor of the sea, the sun and light representing the whole span of individual life in different relationships and from different points of view. Like

1 The Waves, p. 6.

2 Ibid., p. 46.

3 Ibid.

the choruses in a play or the intermezzos of an opera, they not only connect the various parts, but also precede and explain the action of different sections. The narration of different sections symbolically echoes the preceding interlude. Surcharged with beauty, emotion and symbolic content, the interludes may be considered as short, introductory poems, providing a poetic foundation for the shifting currents of consciousness.

The waves of the sea, breaking on the shore, are the basic structural symbols of the novel. The symbol of the waves is continued throughout the book. A ripple on the surface becomes individualized as a wave, within a group of waves, and each follows the other to break finally on the shore:

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously.¹

The phenomenon of bars rising and breaking on the sand incessantly is depicted through a melodious choice of words. The metaphor of "thin veil" presents a vivid picture of the scene. The comparison of the rhythm of the waves with the breath of a sleeper is also highly suggestive. Virginia Woolf's introspectiveness,

1 The Waves, p. 5.

individual psychological insight, use of specific symbols and above all her imaginative perception lend a poetic element to the interludes.

The second interlude presents the rising sun. The rays transform the immobility of the scenery into mobile liquidity, but a few objects remain static and unchanged:

The sun rose higher.... Sharp stripes of shadow lay on the grass, and the dew dancing on the tips of the flowers and leaves made the garden like a mosaic of single sparks not yet formed into one whole.... The sun laid broader blades upon the house.... Everything became softly amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed, and the steel of the knife were liquid. Meanwhile the concussion of the waves breaking fell with muffled thuds, like logs falling, on the shore.¹

This beautiful picture foreshadows the action of the next part. The first few moments of arriving at the school inaugurate a new phase in the children's life as stepping-stone for future, illuminated with bright dreams. But the "muffled thud" of the waves presents a sharp juxtaposition of harsh facts with imaginative security.

The effect of the sunlight upon the sea-scapes also acts as a symbol. In the first interlude, the early dawn does not provide enough light to enable us to distinguish the sea from the sky, but as it grows brighter the horizon becomes clear, and the consciousness

¹ The Waves, pp. 20-1.

gets clarified. Likewise, the individual consciousness of each person has first of all to be seen as a part of the Ocean of Consciousness, and then a means to reveal its own contours. The individual consciousness is also symbolized through the effect of the sunlight on the birds.

Like a conscious poet of nature, Virginia Woolf has underlined the relationship of nature with human life through a clear two-fold movement of language. On the first level, she directly presents pictures with the help of similes. For example :

As they splashed and drew back they left a black rim of twigs and cork on the shore and straws and sticks of wood, as if some light shallop had foundered and burst its sides and the sailor had swum to land and bounded up the cliff and left his frail cargo to be washed ashore.¹

In other passages, Virginia Woolf lends a human value and human relationship to the whole scenery with an almost pagan exhilaration and personification. We may quote the description of the on-coming light being compared with a lamp raised by the arm of a woman from below the horizon:

...as if the arm of a woman crouched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. Then she raised her

1 The Waves, p. 53.

lamp higher and the air seemed to
become fibrous....¹

Again, there is another exquisite sample of this kind:

The girl who had shaken her head and made
all the jewels, the topaz, the aquamarine,
the water-coloured jewels with sparks of
fire in them, dance, now bared her brows
and with wide-opened eyes drove a straight
pathway over the waves.²

This oneness of soul with nature can be seen in the
poetry of some of the Romantics. Wordsworth has treated
this theme with particular sublimity; he enters into a
kind of conscious relationship with nature as Virginia
Woolf does — the two remaining distinctly two, and yet
interrelated:

When we had given our bodies to the wind,
And all the shadowy banks on either side
Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still
The rapid lines of motion, then at once
Have I, reclining back upon my heels,
Stopped short; yet still the solitary cliffs
Wheelled by me — even as if the earth had rolled
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,
Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched
Till all was tranquil....³

In The Waves, Virginia Woolf uses colour in an
attempt to create psychological pictures, employing the
qualities of light and shadow in an impressionistic
manner. The plastic use of colours in the interludes,

1 The Waves, p. 1.

2 Ibid., pp. 52-3.

3 The Prelude, Book I, ll. 453-63, The Poetical Works
of Wordsworth, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, p. 639.

and in different sections also gives an idea of organisation on the surface. The impressionistic use of colours supplements and enhances the sonorous music of the words. For example:

At mid-day the heat of the sun made the hills grey as if shoved and singed in an explosion, while, further north, in cloudier and rainier countries, hills smoothed into slabs as with the back of a spade....¹

What becomes strikingly beautiful in the total appeal of the interludes is the poetic delineation of the different pictures of the sun, representing life in various spans. The sun ultimately becomes a measuring-yard and has been presented through figurative visual imagery which imparts a poetic depth to the novel:

The sun was sinking. The hard stone of the day was cracked and light poured through its splinters. Red and gold shot through the waves, in rapid running arrows, feathered with darkness. Erratically rays of light flashed and wandered, like signals from sunken islands, or darts shot through laurel groves by shameless, laughing boys.²

The day has been compared with a cracked stone, through the cracks of which splinters of light are peering. The imaginative-creative language of this passage is noteworthy. The interludes are full of such enchanting word-pictures. Let us quote an instance:

1 The Waves, p. 106.

2 Ibid., p. 147.

There was no sound of cropping, and no sound of wheels, but only the sudden roar of the wind letting its sails fill and brushing the tops of the grasses. One bone lay rain-pocked and sun-bleached till it shone like a twig that the sea has polished. The tree, that had burnt foxy red in spring and in midsummer bent pliant leaves to the south wind, was now black as iron, and as bare.¹

The words like "filled sails", "rain-pocked", "foxy-red", "pliant leaves", "black as iron", "sudden roar" and "liquid shadow" present an exact replica of the scene, elevating it to the level of sheer poetry. In the two extracts, quoted above, we can find illustrations of visual, tactile, sensory and gustatory images.

The song of the birds in the interludes is also symbolic. In the sixth interlude the desolate birds tend to be more and more aloof. They no longer sing. Their glutton image is carried forth in human perspectives too. The descriptions of the natural phenomenon -- the dragon-fly, the river and reeds, the cattle, etc., show a dead stillness. The stray rays reflecting in the room strengthen this feeling which is ultimately climaxed in the image of the stranded fish;

The waves massed themselves, curved their backs and crashed. Up spurted stone and shingle. They swept round the rocks, and the spray, leaping high, spattered the walls of a cave that had been dry before, and left pools inland, where some fish stranded lashed its tail as the wave drew back.²

1 The Waves, p. 148.

2 Ibid., p. 148.

The poetic language suggests an atmosphere of desolation and imminent destruction. The deft touches of visual and auditory images lend a poetic depth to this description.

Like Shakespeare and Wordsworth, Virginia Woolf knows how to create poetry out of the idioms and rhythms of the spoken language. Through the semi-dialectical pattern of The Waves, Virginia Woolf produces a new music through her language, a new beauty and a new order of feeling. Carrying the impressionist technique further, she introduces into the novel much of the traditional material of poetry -- "diluted", -- as Prof. I. A. Richards has observed. In The Waves, we cannot only hear what the characters say, but also what they think. And in the places when they are most imaginatively conceived, we are able to guess their thoughts from the tone of their talk. The speech of Bernard, when he momentarily shunts off personality and sees "the world without a self", serves to illustrate it:

But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red -- even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How describe or say anything in articulate words again? -- save that it fades, save that it undergoes a gradual transformation, becomes, even in the course of one short walk, habitual -- this scene also....

But for a moment I had sat on the turf somewhere high above the flow of the sea and the sound of the woods, had seen the house, the garden, and the waves breaking. The old nurse who turns the pages of the picture-book had stopped and had said, 'Look. This is the truth'.¹

Here Bernard breaks out of subjectivity into a phenomenological perception. The sentences possess a controlled movement of rhythmic verse. The recovery of the lifeward impulse asserts itself through a sudden Shakespearean vitality of language. The extract has a haunting note of enchantment, which gradually creates a significant poetic resonance.

In the nine sections of The Waves, we can also detect a definite musical pattern. The six characters in the novel may be treated as six instruments in the orchestra. The Waves is a sextet in sonata form, which is "an expanded ABA pattern divided into an exposition, a development section, and a recapitulation."² In this novel, Virginia Woolf produces an instrumental effect of orchestration. She also succeeds in recapitulation, without any wearisome repetition of the initial exposition, through the diversity of individual memories in section seven, the memories of the group assembled at Hampton Court in section eight, and Bernard's summing

1 The Waves, p. 204.

2 Colvin S. Brown, Music and Literature : A Comparison of the Arts (Athens, Ga : University of Georgia Press, 1958), p. 162.

up in section nine. Virginia Woolf "works consistently inwards, away from the world of events."¹ She continually moves from the concrete to the abstract. Like Goethe, Proust, Joyce and Aiken, she uses persons and events merely as a bare scaffolding to present the abstraction of the consciousness itself. This element, coupled with recapitulation without redundancy, conveys a musical impression. Like all her novels, The Waves is also full of music, and can be called a symphonic poem.

The Waves, in fact, is a mystical poetic work, which presents a shifting pageant of life by means of the portrayal of a succession of sensations and impressions. The imagery and the rhythms of the novel rise from Virginia Woolf's inner responses to life's complex experiences, which fluctuate with the strange irregular rhythms of life. She has created her own method, which may be described as lyrical "esthetisation of the method used by Chekhov in The Three Sisters."² Her technical perfection coupled with the discreet lyricism of her art results in a sheer poetry of the highest sensibility. She never eschews the medium of the fine senses, and

1 Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf (London : Longmans, Green and Co., 1962), p. 9.

2 Dmitri Mirsky, "The Highbrows, 6 : Bloomsbury", The Intelligentsia of Great Britain, trans. Alec Brown (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1935), pp. 11-20.

consequently her prose narratives "sparkle with a thousand diamonds."¹ What she has achieved in The Waves is a skilful scattering and diffusion of waves of emotional sensitivity in significant areas of human feeling, and she has achieved it through exquisite poetry of existence.

1 Harold Nicholson, "Review", Action (8 Oct., 1931), p. 8.

Chapter VI

The Years

Moving from the topography of the inner life back to the local geography of social situations, Virginia Woolf's The Years, first published in 1937, basically appears as a poetic apprehension of life itself. In it the author consciously capitalizes on the incongruity of situations. However, the language, the suggestive imagery, the rhythm of narration, and, above all, the intensity of felt-experience make this novel highly poetic. The Years deals with the daily life, aspirations, ambitions, dreams and tragedies of the people of Pargiter family. Their imaginative stasis and the consequential poverty of life are dealt with a clarity of vision, which transforms the simple chronicle into a poetic representation of a particular group in a given span of social time.

Virginia Woolf often uses the weather functionally to give a kind of tone to her narratives. In Jacob's Room we are told that "the bitter eighteenth-century rain rushed down the kennel."¹ In Orlando each century has its appropriate weather, and the 19th century is

1 Jacob's Room, p. 63.

characterised by a general dampness, "The great cloud that hung... over the whole of the British Isles...."¹

Similarly, in The Years each chapter has a prelude which describes the weather that will prevail throughout.

Very much like the interludes in The Waves, these preludes present a background against which various events take place. Human moods are portrayed in terms of natural phenomena, and this reminds us of Tennyson and Coleridge. The novel opens with a superb picture of nature;

It was an uncertain spring. The weather, perpetually changing, sent clouds of blue and of purple flying over the land. In the country farmers, looking at the fields, were apprehensive; in London umbrellas were opened and then shut by people looking up at the sky. But in April such weather was to be expected.²

A description of business activities in London follows, and again we have a pictorial and poetic passage ;

When the sun went down a million little gas-lights, shaped like the eyes in peacocks' feathers, opened in their glass cages, but nevertheless broad stretches of darkness were left on the pavement. The mixed light of the lamps and the setting sun was reflected equally in the placid waters of the Round Pond and the Serpentine. Miners-out, trotting over the Bridge in hansom cabs, looked for a moment at the charming vista. At length the moon rose and its polished coin, though obscured now and then by wisps of cloud, shone out with serenity, with severity, or perhaps with complete indifference.

1 Orlando : A Biography (London : Granada Publishing Ltd., 1983) p. 142.

2 The Years, (London : Granada Publishing Ltd., 1982), p. 5.

slowly wheeling, like the rays of a searchlight, the days, the weeks, the years passed one after another across the sky.¹

The comparison of gaslights with the eyes on peacocks' feathers produces an imaginative vastness which is reinforced further by the imagery of moon as polished coin. The days pass away slowly, lighting gradually a limited span of life, turning into weeks and then years. The passing of years does not have any ulterior motive; they pass away aimlessly in an arbitrary fashion. As a poet with a strong sense of eye Virginia Woolf has only a few equals. Her close and minute scenic observation and the balanced poise of the language again bring Tennyson to our minds. The landscape is consciously drawn as a befitting prelude to the following description, giving a poetic tenderness to the whole. The clarity of language coupled with an imaginative mode of presentation creates a poetic atmosphere.

There is neither any historical cycle, nor any orderly progression of the seasons from section to section. In the next chapter 1891, we find a poetically rich picture of autumn as prelude:

The autumn wind blew over England. It twitched the leaves off the trees, and down they fluttered, spotted red and yellow, or sent them floating, flaunting in wide curves before they settled. In towns coming in gusts round the corners,

¹ The Years, pp. 5-6.

the wind blew here a hat off; there
lifted a veil high above a woman's head.¹

The rhythmic use of language portrays a mobile picture of flowing leaves in the turbulent wind. The strong wind, which sweeps the trees away, also sweeps away the dresses of Londoners, a hat here, a veil there. The brisk circulation of money is also compared with the fast moving action of mind, which produces immediate results. This figurative presentation foreshadows the ensuing action of the chapter, which is equally full of rapidly moving transactions between Eleanor and Ruffus, between Morris and his legal profession, and between Colonel Abel, Eugene and Igby. This exquisite and metaphoric appreciation of scenic beauty lends a poetic touch to the description.

Virginia Woolf uses language as an appropriate medium of presenting things in a poetic mode. Her language-tones are well-adapted to depict a frivolous, moody picture or a gloomy aspect of mental behaviour. For example,

She walked slowly along towards
Trafalgar Square, holding the paper
in her hand. Suddenly the whole scene
froze into immobility. A man was joined
to a pillar; a lion was joined to a man;
they seemed stilled, connected, as if
they would never move again.²

1 The Years, p. 70.

2 Ibid., p. 88.

Again,

The smoke hung in veils over the spires and domes of the University cities. Here it choked the mouth of a gargyle; there it clung to the walls that were peeled yellow.¹

In this novel mental reactions dominate the nature descriptions, and at the same time they are viewed through a matching perspective of the scenery. The predominance of yellow in some passages symbolizes decay and disarray in every field, reminding us of Eliot's "yellow fog" in "Prufrock." The poetic prose of these passages has a definite accuracy, adding a new dimension to our understanding of this thoroughly poetic novel.

The next chapter 1907 also opens with a sonorous description of mid-summer activities.

It was midsummer; and the nights were hot. The moon, falling on water, made it white, inscrutable, whether deep or shallow. But where the moonlight fell on solid objects it gave them a burnish and a silver plating, so that even the leaves in country roads seemed varnished. All along the silent country roads leading to London carts plodded; the iron reins fixed in the iron bands, for vegetables, fruit, flowers travelled slowly. Heaped high with round crates of cabbage, cherries, carnations, they looked like caravans piled with the goods of tribes migrating in search of water, driven by enemies to seek new pasturage. On they plodded, down this road, that road, keeping close to the kerb. Even the horses, had they been blind, could

1 The Years, p. 71.

have heard the hum of London in the distance;
and the drivers, dosing, yet saw through half
shut eyes the fiery gauze of the eternally
burning city.¹

The lovely imagery of this passage simply enchants us with its exact, proportionate balance. The plastic use of colour adds to the overall poetic charm. The image of the moon, with its obliquely falling rays on different objects, is finely done. The moon-rays impart a silver plating to solid objects, and they appear as if they were varnished white. The quiet beauty of the natural phenomena is transferred to the city-life as well. The roads leading to London are teeming with energetic activities. The carts heaped high with round crates look like "caravans piled with the goods of tribes migrating in search of water, driven by enemies to seek new pasturage."² The underlying hint of Yiddish mythology gives a deeper meaning to these lines. This hint is repeated again after a few lines in the "fiery gauze of the eternally burning city." The imagery suggests an eternal procession continuing through all the ages of human history. But there is no suggestion of its being usefully associated with human psyche. The eternal nature is presented beautifully, but without imparting it a Wordsworthian soul. The following chapter is also written in the same vein. In its metaphoric phrases and in the

1 The Years, p. 100.

2 Ibid.

delicately moving rhythm of the language, we are always aware of a poetry of intense feeling. But the human soul is not given any fruitful direction in which it can enlarge itself. The poetry remains on the surface-maneuvers, and does not probe the deeper regions.

In the next chapter, this indifference of nature turns into a kind of bitterness against meaningful attitudes. The banality and grotesqueness of human situation are reinforced by the natural scenery:

It was March and the wind was blowing.
But it was not 'blowing'. It was
scraping, scourging. It was so cruel.
So unbecoming. Not merely did it
bleach faces and raise red spots on noses;
it tweaked up skirts; showed stout legs;
made trousers reveal skeleton shins. There
was no roundness, no fruit in it. Rather
it was like the curve of a scythe which
cuts, not corn, usefully; but destroys,
revelling in sheer sterility. With one
blast it blew out colour -- even a Rembrandt
in the National Gallery, even a solid ruby
in a Bond Street window; one blast and they
were gone.¹

The vivacious image of angular scythe is focused sharply. It evokes an atmosphere of banal sharpness which destroys everything without the least compassion, "revelling in sheer sterility". The image of scythe also gives a continuous and pre-historic nature to the organic relationship between man and nature. The language-rhythms are apparently poetic, and give a delicacy to the narration. The sharpness of imagery is continued throughout the passage:

1 The Years. p. 113.

Had it any breeding place it was in the
Isle of Dogs among tincans lying beside
a warehouse drab on the banks of a
polluted city. It tossed up rotten leaves,
gave them another span of degraded existence;
scorned, derided them, yet had nothing to
put in the place of the scorned, the
derided. Down they fell. Uncreative,
unproductive, yelling its joy in destruction,
its power to peel off the bark, the bloom,
and show the bare bone, it paled every
window; drove old gentlemen further and
further into the leather smelling recesses
of clubs; and old ladies to sit eyeless,
leather cheeked, joyless among the tassels
and anti-macassars of their bedrooms and
kitchens.¹

The first two lines of the passage are almost Dickensian
in their presentation of macabre reality. The "Isle
of Dogs" and "tin-cans" suddenly remind us of Yeats'
comment in "The Tower":

"What shall I do with this absurdity --
O heart, O troubled heart -- this caricature,
 decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?"²

The chilliness of the wind has a diabolic,
destructive nature enjoying its own cruelty. The
intensity of this situation, and the gravity of presenta-
tion give a poetic quality to this passage. The
phrases, "its power to peel off the bark," "show the bare
bone", "paled every window", "yelling its joy in
destruction", etc., arouse the wanton image of nature.
Then the imagery becomes painstakingly graphic, and the

1 The Years, p. 113.

2 "The Tower", ll. 1-4, W.B. Yeats : selected Poetry,
ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London : Pan Books Ltd.,
1974), p. 105.

picture of an emptied cart is portrayed in full details. The large-splashing rhythms of the language suggest poetically the sacramental quality of the man-nature relationship. The manipulation of language culminates in the cataloguing of the last few lines. The imaginative quality of the passage, added by the evocative use of language, renders a deep poetic charm to it. However, here, as in Crabbe's poetry, nature subtly reflects an individual's moods and feelings. But nature is not necessarily a source of spiritual strength or physical sustenance for the human beings.

The simultaneous depiction of nature, London and man, and their repercussions on one-another are continued in the next chapter 1910 also:

In the country it was an ordinary day enough; one of the long reel of days that turned as the years passed from green to orange; from grass to harvest. It was neither hot nor cold, an English spring day, bright enough, but a purple cloud behind the hill might mean rain. The grasses rippled with shadow, and then with sunlight.¹

The simplicity of language is enriched by the metaphoric presentation of ideas. The figurative use of "long reel of days", which opens gradually and continually, marking the slow and persistent passage of time, lends suggestivity to the passage. The beautiful imagery of

¹ The Years, p. 124.

"ripped grass" adds to the overall poetic charm. These quiet tendencies can also be traced in the London scene and in the behavioural activities of human beings.

The next chapter 10¹¹ opens with a wonderful poetic picture of the rising sun, which, with its tender vividness and rhythmic description, reminds us of the interludes of The Waves :

The sun was rising. Very slowly it came up over the horizon shaking out light. But the sky was so vast, so cloudless, that to fill it with light took time. Very gradually the clouds turned blue; leaves on forest trees sparkled; down below a flower shone; eyes of beasts -- tigers, monkeys, birds -- sparkled. Slowly the world emerged from darkness. The sea became like the skin of an innumerable scaled fish, glittering gold. Here in the South of France the furrowed vineyards caught the light; the little vines turned purple and yellow; and the sun coming through the slats of the blinds striped the white wall. Paggie, standing at the window, looked down on the court-yard, and saw her husband's book cracked across with shadow from the vine above; and the glass that stood beside him glowed yellow. Cries of peasants working came through the open window.¹

With the gradual ascent of the sun the clarity of the vast sky slowly turns blue, and the shining eyes of beasts and the world itself come out of the darkness. The comparison of the sea with the skin of scaled fish offers us an imaginative picture of its many-coloured

¹ The Waves, p. 148.

surface. Virginia Woolf here makes plastic use of colour. The shimmering gold sea, the grape-vines turning purple and yellow, and the changing pattern of the wall give a poetic vividness to this passage. The visual imagery provides an appropriate atmosphere and suggests a symbolic interpretation in the given context. The arrangement of phrases and the distribution of pauses are also poetically significant within the sentence. The first sentence is quite short while the second gains in length and elaboration, adding to the meaning of the first sentence. The third is the longest, summing up the ideas of the first two sentences. The pattern is repeated again in the passage. Obviously, the complex rhythmic structure of the passage can be compared with that of a poem.

The next chapter 1913 is introduced with a description of snow in January :

It was January. Snow was falling; snow had fallen all day. The sky spread like a grey goose's wing from which feathers were falling all over England. The sky was nothing but a flurry of falling flakes. Lines were levelled; hollows filled; the snow clogged the streams; obscured windows, and lay wedged against doors. There was a faint murmur in the air, a slight crepitation, as if the air itself were turning to snow; otherwise all was silent, save when a sheep coughed, snow flopped from a branch, or slipped in an avalanche down some roof in London. Now and again a shaft of light spread slowly across the sky as a car drove through the muffled roads. But as the

night wore on, snow covered the wheel
ruts; softened to nothingness the
marks of the traffic, and coated monuments,
palaces and statues with a thick vestment
of snow.¹

Both the idea and its presentation are highly poetic. The sense of all-inclusive whiteness of snow is conveyed by the short units into which the sentences are divided, and by the clever placing of strong stress throughout the passage. The suggestive words appeal to our visual sense and a whole land-scape is portrayed before us with the help of the rhythm of the evocative language. The meaning of the underlying poetry dawns upon us as we "hear" the sentences while reading them. The imagery also evokes and strengthens the proper atmosphere. The sky is compared first with a "grey goose's wing from which feathers were falling all over England", and then with a "flurry of falling flakes". These images impart a living quality to the description. The alliteration of "f" sound produces a soft rhythm. The minuteness of observation and its exact communication help us in understanding the mood of the author. Snow dominates the activities of the world of nature and of the world of men. It can be seen in the forthcoming transactions of characters in the novel. Virginia Woolf has cleverly foreshadowed the action through a seemingly superficial description of seasons -- this delicacy of

¹ The Years, p. 165.

craftsmanship lends a poetic charm to the passage. The next chapter "914" opens with a quiet mood.

It was a brilliant spring; the day was radiant. Even the air seemed to have a burr in it as it touched the tree tops; it vibrated, it rippled. The leaves were sharp and green. In the country old church clocks rasped out the hour; the rusty sound went over fields that were red with clover, and up went the rocks as if flung by the bells. Round they wheeled; then settled on the tree tops.¹

The auditory and visual imagery of this passage at once creates an atmosphere of close intimacy between man and nature. The small phrases build up a melodious picture, to which a poetic softness is added with the help of resonant words like "vibrant", "rippled", etc. The sudden flight of rocks, startled by the church bells is beautifully depicted. The language is chaste, but the intonations are poetic and poignant.

From this reciprocal and poetic relationship, we are shifted to the loneliness of a cold, dark winter night in 1917.

A very cold winter's night, so silent that the air seemed frozen, and, since there was no moon, congealed to the stillness of glass spread over England. Ponds and ditches were frozen; the puddles made glazed eyes in the roads, and on the pavement the frost had raised slippery knobs. Darkness pressed on the windows; towns had merged themselves in open country. No light shone, save when a searchlight rayed round the sky, and stopped, here and there, as if to ponder some fleecy patch.²

1 The Years, p. 172.

Virginia Woolf's imaginative sense of life elevates this desolate scene to a fantastic poetic height. The flow of the language and the awareness of some design behind the apparent cold lifelessness make us think of Dostoyevsky, particularly of his famous long story White Nights. The thickened atmosphere, glazed puddles and frozen ditches present an all pervading phenomenon of weird darkness, which spreads to the city-life also. The absence of light in the visible scenery is basically correlated with the absence of any imaginative instinct for real life in the city-dwellers. Eleanor, Maggie, Sara, Renny and Nicholas try to talk about the war and their reactions to it, but their attempts are marred by their lack of creative vision. The darkness of nature is supported by the darkness of humanitarian vision. Virginia Woolf touches the subject like a poet, subtly and delicately, grasping and penetrating the psychological weakness of her characters. This insight into the human psychology imparts a poetic depth to Virginia Woolf's characters.

The next chapter 1918 opens with another description of winter, filled with loud noises. It starts with a beautiful visual imagery of November sky, covered with a many-folded veil of mist, damp and cold. But soon the tone shifts and auditory images replace the visual scenery:

A veil of mist covered the November sky; a many-folded veil, so fine-meshed that it made one density. It was not raining, but here and there the mist condensed on the surface into dampness and made pavements greasy. Here and there on a grass blade or on a hedge leaf a drop hung motionless. It was windless and calm. Sounds coming through the veil -- the bleat of sheep, the creak of rooks -- were deadened. The uproar of the traffic merged into one growl. Now and then as if a door opened and shut, or the veil parted and closed, the roar boomed and faded.¹

In the "one growl" of city life, where an average person would have heard nothing, Virginia Woolf has distinguished the individual notes making up the total harmony. The booming and fading noise is beautifully delineated through the imagery of a veil -- now parting, now closing --, covering the whole phenomena. The tender beauty, the rhythm, and the delicacy in handling the situation can be compared with the best of Romantic poets in this realm.

The last chapter is prologued by a picture of the summer evening. Though somehow inconclusive, it is deeply poetic:

It was a summer evening; the sun was setting; the sky was blue still, but tinged with gold, as if a thin veil of gauze hung over it, and here and there in the gold-blue amplitude an island of cloud lay suspended. In the fields the trees stood majestically caparisoned, with their innumerable leaves gilt. Sheep and cows, pearl white and parti-coloured, lay recumbent or munched their

1 The Years, p. 231.

way through the half transparent grass. An edge of light surrounded everything. A red-gold fume rose from the dust on the roads. Even the little red brick villas on the high roads had become porous, incandescent with light, and the flowers in cottage gardens, lilac and pink like cotton dresses, shone veined as if lit from within. Faces of people standing at cottage doors or padding along pavements showed the same red glow as they fronted the slowly sinking sun.¹

The long flowing sentences unfold before us the constantly changing variations of the sky's colours. The sensuous apprehension of nature can be compared with Wordsworth's brilliant descriptions of nature. In Virginia Woolf, the deeper music of words and sounds constitutes the inner poetry of novels. The reddish glow of the evening sun transforms every object into a thing of beauty. The glow is reflected on the roads, in the red brick-villas, in the flowers and prints, and in the human faces. The sun has enriched every object imparting a portion of its radiant glow to each of them. The melodious flow of language, the sensuous delight and the translucent rhythm make this passage essentially poetic.

The method of prologuing each chapter by a beautiful description of nature is inherently poetic. In the novel this method basically evokes a poetic atmosphere replete with suggestive imagery and imaginative phrases. The facts of the season with which Virginia Woolf

¹ *The Years*, p. 234.

begins each "chapter", each year, are perhaps the most prosaic facts in man's existence, yet they carry a weight of emotive associations, which make them immensely significant. This mingling of the transitory and the eternal, this constant motion and suspended stillness undoubtedly contribute immensely to the poetic strain in Virginia Woolf's novels.

However, the beautiful poetry of The Years is altogether different from that of her other novels. This novel is often considered as a consummation of Orlando. It stands apart in its manner of investigating life, the poetic truth of which serves as a stepping stone towards the transcending vision of her later novels. This difference can be seen in the London-sketches of The Years, which, unlike those in Mrs. Palloway, do not occasion any joy. London appears both paltry and demonic. As she walks the streets, Eleanor finds "the vice, the obscenity, the reality of London."¹ At Charing Cross men are sucked in at the gates of the station as at the gates of the under world.² The London of The Years is the sordid, conspiratorial and ignorant city of Eliot's "Waste Land". The individual characters exist in dull loneliness, and the city itself is cut off from both the natural and spiritual sources of life:

1 The Years, p. 88.

2 Ibid., p. 180.

Unreal city
Under the brown fog of a winter noon
Mr. Eugenides, the Cyprian merchant
Unshaven, with a pocket full of carrots.¹

London in this novel can be compared with the night-marish, labyrinthine London immersed in smoky fog, as depicted by Dickens in his novels at times. Virginia Woolf's London in this novel is as much her vision of London as is Blake's in his poem "London". It also darkens and distorts reality. The noise of the polluted city jars on the nerves. North, recently returned from Africa, feels the deafening noise of the city which prevents him from thinking coherently:

The girl was in the room, and she distracted him; also the noise of London still bothered him. Against the dull background of traffic noises, of wheels turning and brakes squeaking, there rose near at hand the cry of a woman suddenly alarmed for her child; the monotonous cry of a man selling vegetables; and far away a barrel organ was playing. It stopped; it began again.²

The brisk superficial scenery hides behind it an intensity of revulsion and suppressed rebellion against changed circumstances which are presented poetically in this passage.

In The Years, the conscious control of the changing experience and the rhythms corresponding to the

1 "The Fire Sermon", The Waste Land, ll. 207-10, Selected Poems; T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 59.

2 The Years, p. 242.

inner responses of living experience produces a poetry unequalled by any other novelist. In her insight into the human mind and situation, Virginia Woolf is, perhaps, matchless. The complexity, the subtlety, and the eerie atmosphere of human psyche are conveyed through a picture of nature, which gives a poetic touch to the narrative. The following few lines may be quoted in this connection :

The sun was setting; one cloud lay curled like a red feather in the blue. She looked down. It was queer to see cabs turning corners, going round this street and down the other, and not to hear the sound they made. It was like a map of London; a section laid beneath them. The summer day was fading; lights were being lit, primrose lights, still separate, for the glow of the sunset was still in the air....¹

There is as much the quality of vision in Virginia Woolf's treatment of the city's paltriness, as in Shelley's "Triumphs of Life", or in Eliot's "The Waste Land". These works seem to be consciously related to each other in substance. But the attitude of solemnity towards the city that we find in Mrs. Palloway is absent from this novel. Here it is a "Polluted city, unbelieving city, city of dead fish and wornout frying-pans."² The life of the city has its ebbs and

1 The Years, pp. 250-51.

2 Ibid., p. 260.

flows, its sudden out-breaks, and its monotony of business -- all this forms the recurrent theme of the novel. The poetic strain results from the deep emotional treatment of it. Sara and North discuss the grease and hair the Jewish lodger leaves in the bath. Sara describes her reaction after learning that she must share the Jew's bath, "And I said, 'Must I join your conspiracy? Stain the hand, the unstained hand', -- he could see her hand gleam as she waved it in the half-light of the sitting-room, '---and sign on, and serve a master; all because of a Jew in my bath, all because of a Jew?'"¹

The ugliness of the city breeds ugliness of mind, and the imagination has no power to transform the city, and the sinner one suffers in face of this ugliness only reinforces one's participation in it. The details of street scenes in The Years show a total lack of delight and vitality. As Delia rides in the carriage at her mother's funeral, she looks out of the window:

Through the slit of the blind, Delia noticed dogs playing; a beggar singing; men raising their hats as the hearse passed them.... The shops were already gay with spring clothing; women paused and looked in at the windows. But they would have to wear nothing but black all the summer, Delia thought, looking at Edward's coal-black trousers.²

1 The Years, p. 260.

2 Ibid., p. 66.

The tired rhythm of the writing, the blandness of Felia's thought-process, and the limited response to the gay spring clothing are not merely symptoms of depression caused by her mother's death, but they are also symptoms of the characters' inability to transcend their immediate, petty concerns to apprehend and appreciate the total vision.

The stasis of imagination is underlined by the characters' general inability to do anything. In the sketch of Peter, we are told that nothing is happening, and the eyes of the rapacious old woman who looks out of the window have nothing upon which to feed their hunger. Characters wait for a kettle to boil or for a parent to die. Yet there is no true expectation in their waiting; they seek only relief from tedious tasks. Indeed, the characters cannot even imagine a truly positive happiness. The rhythmical description of the crowded streets and shops, which present the activity as rocks sweeping in a field, are merely a hypocritical escape. Even Regent's Park, visited by Sara and Martin on a beautiful spring day, provides only a temporary relief and momentary distraction, and not a vital joy.

In fact, the poetry of this novel lies in the psychological depiction of intense feelings through an exploratory-creative use of language. Virginia Woolf is by nature selective, and her selections are marked

by minute and intense observations of imaginative exuberance, formal neatness and balance. Such intensity of feeling can only be found in poetry. Different psychological moments are presented with a marvellous understanding. For example, Edward, while studying in Oxford, tries to concentrate on his books, but

The clocks began striking. He listened. The clocks went on striking. The lines that had graved themselves on his face slackened.... He felt as if he had thrown himself down on the turf after running a race. But for a moment it seemed to him that he was still running; his mind went on without the book. It travelled by itself without impediments through a world of pure meaning; but gradually it lost its meaning.... he saw the cream-coloured panels; a bunch of poppies in a blue vase. The last of the strokes had sounded. He gave a sigh and rose from the table.¹

The striking of the clocks is related to Edward's release of tension. His mental faculties waver after intense concentration, and the strain has left him physically exhausted. The depth with which this dazed ambivalent feeling is conveyed lends a poetic charm to this passage.

Again, Kitty, while going for a night's rest, is curiously conscious of the jingling sound of bells:

But the bells were making their usual commotion. She hated the sound of the bells; it always seemed to her a dismal sound; and then, just as one stopped, here was another beginning. They went walloping one over another, one after another, as if they would never be finished. She counted eleven, twelve, and then they

¹ The Years, p. 40.

went on thirteen, fourteen... clock
repeating clock through the damp, drizzling
air. It was late.¹

The effect of the continuation of the jingling sound on Kitty's psyche is as pronounced as it can be in poetry. A total meaning of the atmosphere emerges before us from the particular way in which the words are suggestively used. The onomatopoeic effects add to the overall poetic charm of this passage. The short phrases stuffed in the sentence form the precise sound basis of the rhythm of this passage. The underlying heightened emotion also imparts a depth to these lines.

Colonel Abel, while he visits Pigby on the occasion of Maggie's birthday, is acutely aware of his loneliness, "One must burn one's own smoke".² The leisurely surroundings make him gloomier:

Yes...the house was full of pretty things. He looked vaguely at a great crimson chair with gilt claws that stood in the hall.... He paused on the door-step and looked out into the street. It was quite dark; lamps were lit; the autumn was drawing in; and as he marched up the dark windy street, now spotted with rain-drops, a puff of smoke blew full in his face; and leaves were falling.³

1 The Years, p. 49.

2 Ibid., p. 99.

3 Ibid.

In the novel, the crimson gilt chair is referred to many times; and as it gains in associations, it almost becomes a symbol. In his old age Colonel Abel feels cut off from all emotional security. The sorrow and agony of his lonely days is poetically transmitted to the street-scene, which is also sad and desolate. The sad and silent rhythm of these lines reminds us of Tennyson's "Marina".

The broken sheds look'd sad and strange
Unlifted was the clinking latch.
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.¹

Virginia Woolf transforms the random moments of being into an epiphany like a poet. This epiphany presents a true picture of emotional life. While talking to Sara and Maggie, Rose suddenly remembers her childhood :

They talked, she thought, as if Abercorn Terrace were a scene in a play. The talked as if they were speaking of people who were real, but not real in the way in which she felt herself to be real. It puzzled her; it made her feel that she was two different people at the same time; that she was living at two different times at the same moment. She was a little girl wearing a pink frock; and here she was in this room, now.²

The past is like a scene in a play with oneself as an actor. There is a division of the self and an

1 "Marina", ll. 5-8, English Verse, Vol. V, ed. W. Peacock (Oxford : The University Press, 1959), p. 63.

2 The Years, p. 129.

effect of simultaneity as memory coexists with the present moment. Virginia Woolf's ability to conjure up the past gives an inimitable charm of poetry to her novels. The dichotomy of self and its poetic treatment can be perceived in Sara's mental process, in which complete knowledge alludes her, and she is constantly aware of the inherent human imperfection:

'And you --' she said, looking at him. It was as if she were trying to put two different versions of him together; the one on the telephone perhaps and the one on the chair. Or was there some other? This half knowing people, this half being known, this feeling of the eye on the flesh, like a fly crawling -- how uncomfortable it was, he thought; but inevitable, after all these years.¹

The phrase, "like a fly crawling", is extremely rich in its suggestiveness. Very much like Dickens, Virginia Woolf's imaginative energy transforms the simple descriptive realism into a piece of sheer poetry. A couple of extracts may be quoted to elucidate the point.

It was the force that she had put into the words that impressed her, not the words. It was as if she still believed with passion -- she, old Eleanor -- in the things that man had destroyed. A wonderful generation, she thought, as they drove off. Believers....²

Again,

1 The Years, p. 239.

2 Ibid., p. 253.

and there were people passing; the strutting; the tiptoeing; the pasty; the ferret-eyed; the bowler-hatted, servile innumerable army of workers. And I said, "Must I join your conspiracy? Stain the hand, the unstained hand, "---he could see her hand gleam as she waved it in the half-light of the sitting-room, "---and sign on, and serve a master; all because of a Jew in my bath, all because of a Jew?"¹

The dramatic rolling on of epithets after phrases gives this passage an ensnaring splendour, which culminates in the equally dramatic phrases used by Sara.

The difficulty of integrating various aspects of a person into the concept of a single person is one of the themes of The Years also; but there the difficulty is a challenge and stimulus to the eternal, instinctive probing and balancing. In The Years desperate images of a single person result in a mental numbness. After a period of separation only a gesture here and there makes one character recognisable to another. These scattered gestures do not lead to anything more profound than a vague sense of familiarity. As Sara describes her guest to her telephone caller, North realizes that his label is "my cousin from Africa". Sara, in turn, comes back to his consciousness "in sections; first the voice; then the attitude; but something remained unknown."² It is in fact, an under-statement of the impoverished

1 The Years, p. 260.

2 Ibid., p. 239.

impressions one has about another person. The oppressive atmosphere of the novel arises from people's knowledge of the futility of mental efforts. In the chapter 1910, Sara and Maggie wait for Rose and try to predict her manners.¹ The familiar theme of the pain of confrontation is a grotesque comedy in this scene, based upon the fear of being confronted with data one cannot process. Sara tries to prepare herself for the meeting by enacting it. Her enactment suggests a mockery of the assumption that anything new will happen during such a meeting, yet her ignorance of the colour of Rose's hair shows her inability to tame the confrontation by fore-sight. Her anguish at Rose's approach is ridiculous, and Maggie's response to it is justified. But the emotion of anguish is also justified by the mind's helplessness against the impressions which need to be processed. Sara is an exception among the Pargiters in her sensitivity to this fragmentation; her madness, and her inability to accept fragmentation placidly grant her a greater sanity than her "no-nonsense" sister.

Like a true poet, Virginia Woolf is able to delve deep into the hidden fabric of human psyche. She authentically portrays the inner life, the moral failures, the weaknesses, and the perversities of human nature, as

¹ The Years, pp. 126-27.

well as its grandeur, with an imaginative attitude towards everything. We may quote a few lines to illustrate it:

Again they sat silent, looking at the fire. Eleanor wished that he would go on talking- the man she called Nicholas. Then, she wanted to ask him, when will this new world come? When shall we be free? When shall we live adventurously, wholly, not like cripples in a cave? He seemed to have released something in her; she felt not only a new space of time, but new powers, something unknown within her. She watched his cigarette moving up and down.¹

The poetic rhetoricism hides a tone of wishful thinking and skepticism. Eleanor's susceptibilities are brought into a state of heightened excitement, which finds expression in a prose indistinguishable from blank verse. Eleanor's excitement relieves itself in recurring rhythms like the body in the dance. Eleanor's inner process is presented in a deep psychological manner. The emotional rhythm and the cadence of the passage give a poetic depth to it.

The Years basically deals with the dilemma of mediocre human beings who possess no aesthetic escape. The language and consequently the gestures become futile. The characters often act as if they were captured in a tesseract, and the alternatives are initially the same. The nightmare states of horror gradually assume a sharpness. The facelessness of the characters is asserted,

1 The Years, p. 227.

again and again, through the complex and subtle maneuvers of poetic language.

The triumph of To the Lighthouse lies in its ability to communicate effectively a personal sensibility and a personal vision. But in The Years, personal sensibility is so successfully thwarted by quotidian concerns that communication is impossible, not because sensibility itself cannot be communicated, but because it contains nothing worth-communicating. The failure of vision is a failure of thought, a failure of pattern. Towards the close of the novel, Eleanor wonders: "is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half remembered, half foreseen?"¹ This failure of imaginative construction is linked to a failure of language. Repeatedly words are dissociated from meaning, or wordless sounds take on strange, arbitrary meaning. The cries of an old man selling iron in the noisy street have their meaning blotted out; only their rhythm remains.² At Kitty's party Martin wonders what the stock vocabulary -- "heavenly", "amazing", "marvellous", etc. -- mean. His lack of understanding is not actually ignorance but a symptom of his belief that the conversationalist's world has no substance. The conventional language used at the party

1 The Years, p. 282.

2 Ibid., p. 126.

marks no differentiation of response: Ann says that the tree is lovely in the same tone of voice that she uses to proclaim that Martin is charming.¹ Characters also repeat words in order to force meaning from them, but such repetition only confounds their meaning. Concentration on words also distorts them. While listening to the strange, repetitive conversation, North feels that "he had been in the middle of a jungle; in the heart of darkness; cutting his way towards the light; but provided only with broken sentences, single words, with which to break through the briar-bush of human bodies, human wills and voices, that bent over him, binding him, blinding him...."² He continues to listen but words jumble up in his mind to form nonsense words.

In Virginia Woolf's novels, her keen interest in the repetition of life is reflected in her idea of a cyclical view of history. The repetition of memory and words is used to give an echoing poetic touch to the novel. Memory is "invaluable in extending the dimensions of the moment; memory is the means by which the individual builds up patterns of personal significance to which to anchor his or her life and secure it against the 'lash of the random unheeding flail'".³

1 The Years, p. 196.

2 Ibid., p. 313.

3. Jeanne Schulkind, Introduction to Virginia Woolf : Moments of Being (London : Triad/Cornada, 1982), p. 25.

The repetition gradually becomes a refrain for further evocations. In the chapter 1880 Kitty visits the Robson family and hears Jo Robson making hen-coops in the back garden". "Hammer, hammer, hammer, he went, fixing a board to the rotten roof."¹ The hammering continues while she meets the rest of the family, "Hammer, hammer, hammer, came from the shed in the garden."² The reiteration ensures that the reader will not forget the incident. When Kitty meets Jo, he reminds her of someone she had met in the past. A little later she remembers her visit to the Robsons and "the sound of hammer, hammer, hammer still rang in her ears."³ She marries Lord Lasswade and the love of her cousin for her is unrequited. He translates Antigone, in which the heroine, like his love, is buried alive. Sara paraphrases it as follows : "The man in the loin-cloth gave three sharp taps with his mallet on the brick. She was buried alive."⁴ Thus, Virginia Woolf uses the triple repetition in a poetically suggestive manner. A little earlier, the hammering is related to the action of vultures pecking at the body of Antigone's brother, "Quick, quick, quick with repeated jerks they struck the mouldy flesh."⁵

1 The Years, p. 53.

2 Ibid., p. 7.

3 Ibid., p. 62.

4 Ibid., p. 105.

5 Ibid.

Later, Edward and Kitty go together to see a performance of Siegfried, in which Wagner's leitmotif coincides with that of the novel:

Here the curtain went up. She leant forward and looked at the stage. The dwarf was hammering at the sword. Hammer, hammer, hammer, he went with little short, sharp strokes.... Hammer, hammer, hammer, he went. She leant back again. What did that make her think of? A young man who came into a room with shavings in his hair.... when she was very young. In Oxford? she had gone to tea with them; had sat on a hard chair; in a very light room; and there was a sound of hammering in the garden. And then a boy came in with shavings in his hair. And she had wanted him to kiss her. Or was it the farm hand up at Carter's, when old Carter had looked up suddenly leading a bull with a ring through its nose?¹

Virginia Woolf thus evokes emotional overtones by resorting to conscious repetitive devices, which lend a poetic intensity to her narration. However, the poetry has a logical development, and the emotional power of memory and sound repetition follow a definite pattern. As the narrative progresses further repetitions are added. We are told that "The glasses jingled on the table. She started slightly, roused from her thoughts about her childhood, and separated the glasses."² Many years later history repeats itself, only this time it is

1 The Waves, p. 141.

2 Ibid., p. 172.

Sara, not Rose, who parts the glasses; "Something rattled on the table. The walls and the floor seemed to tremble.... She parted two glasses that were jingling together."¹ These two occasions on which a younger member of the family meets an older are linked together, the repetition reinforcing our perception of the emptiness of their lives. We are reminded of Time Regained, where the sound of a spoon on a plate is one of the narrator's special memories.

Street cries and barrel organ sound throughout The Years. Our easy acceptance of an accustomed tune is related specifically to the usual art of the story as Virginia Woolf describes it in an early review entitled "Philosophy of Fiction.":

After one has heard the first few bars of a tune upon a barrel organ the further course of the tune is instinctively foretold by the mind and any deviation from that pattern is received with reluctance and discomfort. A thousand tunes of the same sort have grooved a road in our minds and we insist that the next tune we hear shall flow smoothly down the same channels; nor are we often disobeyed. That is also the case with the usual run of stories.²

Virginia Woolf brings to the surface the repetition involved in the usual stories, and so we hear the barrel organ of The Years :

1 The Years, p. 246.

2 "Philosophy of Fiction", Contemporary Writers (London The Hogarth Press, 1965), p. 67.

Against the dull background of traffic noises, of wheels turning and brakes squeaking, there rose near at hand the cry of a woman suddenly alarmed for her child; the monotonous cry of a man selling vegetables; and far away a barrel organ was playing. It stopped; it began again.¹

This passage reminds us of Sartre, whose Roquentin rejects the traditional 'portrait gallery' kind of history; he hears the jazz record again and again and so gains his burden-some freedom. In Sartre's Nausea, Roquentin, hearing the jazz record again and again comes to value the form of artistic creation rather than the accumulation of historical 'facts'. Such techniques definitely add to the poetic beauty of the novel.

The symbolism of The Years is somewhat different from that of other novels of Virginia Woolf. Many images and symbols of The Waves appear again in The Years, though they are formed and developed on altogether different lines. Kitty tears off Thursday from the calendar and screws it into a ball,² just as Susan, before she marries and has children, tears off each day, crumples it in her fist and throws it away. Sara, trying to imagine herself as constituted by thought alone, becomes a root lying inside the earth; just as Louis feels himself to be a root thrust into the earth. Martin, like Bernard, arranges pieces of bread on his

1 The Years, p. 263.

2 Ibid., pp. 49-50.

plate and the bread pellets represent people and his playful control of their destinies.

In Virginia Woolf's other novels, symbols stand as mental or emotional references independent of characters, and can be passed from one character to another. But in The Years the perceiver no longer has the power to integrate his or her responses to the external world. And, therefore, the author creates symbols which indicate general psychological states of the characters which are not forced by them. The perceiver is no longer imaginatively susceptible to the world. The characters notice and fret about stains on ceilings and scars and deformities; they are frequently repelled by their world but they do not see their surroundings as symbols of themselves or of the essential quality of their lives. Momentarily a character will understand the possibility of seeing in the landscape a sympathetic language. Alone in the country, Kitty hears the song of the field and the sky. As Eleanor watches the search-light during the air raid, it seems "to take what she was feeling and to express it broadly and simply, as if another voice were speaking in another language."¹ But such connections are not sustained. Typical of the way the symbols work in this novel is the fact that various characters

1 The Years, p. 229.

are fascinated by the rising flames of a fire, and are disturbed by the difficulty of keeping a fire in order, and hence they are first cold and then over-heated. The characters themselves see the fire simply as a practical issue -- whether it will get out of hand or it will make the room stuffy. It is the author who superimposes a significance upon their practical worries. The stuffiness is readily seen to be part of the atmosphere, but the author must provide clues for a further interpretation. A poet at Delia's party, who shares Charles Tansley's habit of saying nothing but 'I, I, I,' finds it intolerable whenever anyone else says 'I'; for the others' use of 'I' turns him into a 'you'. When Peggy says to him, "I'm tired, I've been up all night, "the fire goes out of the poet's face.¹ Thus the author suggestively connects the fire image to the state of ego, and the difficulty of balancing it, though the characters are never aware of it. In the same way, the recurring image of the Italian arm-chair with its pew-like arms is used by the author in the absence of all perceivers. It is not one of those objects which take on meaning because someone has perceived it (as the house in the middle section of To the Lighthouse, or the objects on Mrs. Palloway's dressing table); it is a symbol created by the author alone to portray emptiness and absence.

¹ The Yeare, p. 276.

However, it is in Virginia Woolf's use of imagery that the poetic strain becomes more explicit. The figurative use of language in the novel evokes the appropriate atmosphere and suggests meanings. We find small crypt sentences like "the grass was becoming invisible, fluid, grey, like water,"¹ or "faces looked parchment-coloured."², and also the longer descriptions with an equal mastery of craftsmanship.

Virginia Woolf's imagery subtly reflects the individual's moods and feelings, which impart a touch of delicate poetry to the novel. For instance:

...she hopped about with one shoe off and one shoe on - 'the eyes, she said, came through every leaf like the darts of the sun; and her ice was melted.... Her ice was melted!' She repeated, tapping her sister on the shoulder as she twirled round on her toe.³

The casual tone of Maggie's behaviour interjects a beautiful poetic line as a characteristic gesture, which gives an element of poetry to these lines. In another instance, the vague fear of expecting German attack is portrayed very delicately. Eleanor is visiting Henry. Meanwhile the siren buzzes and everyone takes shelter in the cellar. The atmosphere is tense:

1 The Years, p. 39.

2 Ibid., p. 86.

3 Ibid., p. 134.

She noticed everything. The Germans must be overhead now. She felt a curious heaviness on top of her head. One, two, three, four, she counted, looking up at the greenish-grey stone. Then there was a violent crack of sound, like the split of lightning in the sky. The spider's web oscillated.¹

The workings of complicated human mind are presented in a suggestive manner. The fearful attitude, and basic cowardice are laid bare without any direct hint. The recognition of a mysterious sense in the human psyche gives a depth to the narration. The web-imagery relates this passage to the other novels of Virginia Woolf. The use of rhythmic suggestive words like "oscillated", etc. give a final touch to the underlying poetry of these lines. By dint of her poetic insight, Virginia Woolf pierces through the apparent horror and gloom of the situation, and presents before us the beauty of the eternal truth. She aesthetically transcends the contradictions inherent in life, and presents the poetry of life itself before her readers. Like Mikhail Sholokhov she writes about the whole truth, omitting nothing, but presenting it poetically. We may quote a few lines from Sholokhov's famous novel And Quiet Flows the Don

¹ The Years, p. 223.

to show how life's beauty and poetry transcend the apparent hopelessness of the situation:

... In August -- when fruits ripen and corn is ready for harvest -- the sky was unsmilingly grey, the rare fine days were oppressive and sultry.

August was drawing to a close. The leaves turned yellow in the orchards, and a mournful purple spread from their stalks. From a distance it looked as though the trees were gashed with wounds and bleeding to death.¹

Now a passage of corresponding grim beauty and submerged poetry is quoted from The Years :

The trombone had moved his station and was wailing lugubriously under the window. The doleful sound, as if a dog had thrown back its head and were baying the moon, floated up to them. She waved her fork in time to it.²

The comparison of the trombone's sound with a wailing dog brings out the sordidness, the pathos, and the painful monotony of the situation. The grimness is crowned with Sara's unintentional waving of the fork to its time. The black humour of the situation transforms this sordid scene into a masterpiece of suggestivity, the genuine creative force of which is matched only by Dickens in English fiction. The black humour can also be

1 Mikhail Sholokhov, And Quiet Flows the Don, Bk. I, translated and revised by Stephen Garry and Robert English (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1978), pp. 304-05.

2 The Years, p. 244.

seen in the scene that parodies the dinner of To the Lighthouse. The complete failure of human relationships occurs in this metaphoric scene. North goes to dinner with Sara before attending the party. The underdone mutton trickling red juice, the cabbage oozing green water, and the fly-flown fruit¹ bring to mind the steaming casserole and the beautifully arranged bowl of fruit at Mrs. Ramsay's table. The two lonely figures of Sara and North seated before that dismal meal in the ugly surroundings seem a monstrous parody of the family and friends gathered in the pleasant setting of the Ramsay dining room. The final contrast between the abortiveness of all attempts to sum things up in The Years, and Bernard's full soliloquy in The Waves, seems to grow naturally out of the differences in these two scenes. The Waves ends on a note of struggle, a resumption of the old hostility between man and nature, as Bernard prepares to face the enemy, Death. The Years ends with the laurel given to nature, "The sun had risen, and the sky above the houses wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace."² Death, ugliness, beauty and art dominate the world of men.

The characters of the novel are deeply concerned with cleanliness, but this concern seems to have little

1 The Years, p. 243.

2 Ibid., p. 331.

effect. The cleanliness of the linen in Mrs. Pargiter's sick-room makes everything seem unreal. Fleanor is described as a woman who would offer a dog a bone and wash her hands afterwards. When Rose comes home, she repeatedly tells Fleanor and Martin that she wants a bath. When Fleanor returns from Spain, she notices the number of different-coloured soaps in the shop-windows and reflects that people wash so thoroughly in England. The obsession with cleanliness and the images of stains are compounded by the number of scars and deformities that appear among the Pargiters and their acquaintances. Uncle Horace has one glass eye. Sara is dropped as an infant, and her shoulders are deformed. During a meeting with her brother and sister, Rose is seen to have a scratch on her chin, and they all recall the time when she had a gash on her wrist, and Eugene had a gash, too. They are blithely unaware of the suicidal tendency expressed by these wounds. They live in a world that is committing suicide, and blandly they register this fact. All such references and images poetically evoke an atmosphere of sordidness and a neurotic compulsion of guilt. The characters seem to have no way out. Reformity, guilt, decay and decrepitude hover over the total world. This totality of despair poetically portrays the lack of a transcendental vision.

The natural world frequently provides images of deformity. Animal images repeatedly appear, showing grotesqueness and perversion instead of vitality or spontaneity. Abel Pargiter's deformed hand resembles the "claw of some caged bird."¹ Edward's college friend Gibbs has a hand like a great red paw, like a piece of raw meat.² At the Law Courts the woman in furs who greets Fleanor has a face like a cat's, and the men in their wigs and gowns are like flocks of birds.³ Lady Warburton, at Kitty's party, descends the stairs like a crab. Both the language and emotions are undermined by animal analogies. At Delia's party Peggy looks at the guests and sees them as cowards, drugged with cheap pleasures. It is impossible, she reflects, to live decently in a world that contains so much brutality and tyranny. However, it is not brutality and tyranny the novel presents as much as drudgery and monotony.

The world of Mrs. Bellows was one of movement and change. In To the Lighthouse, too, much of the power arises from the varying impressions and emotions, and from the mind's volatility. But the atmosphere of The Years is remarkably static. Only a very narrow range of

1 The Years, p. 12.

2 Ibid., p. 42.

3 Ibid., p. 84.

impressions and emotions is possible. Even the familiar street haunting, which in all her other works vitalizes the imagination, provides only a modest relief from daily constriction.

Death -- actual and figurative -- punctuates the novel. Almost every year, chapter, upto 1914 can be remembered for the death of someone in that year. Towards the end of the novel, the entire social structure, the values, standards, and convention have altered -- in a very real sense, a world has died. Eleanor's niece, Peggy, perceives the profundity of the change as she comments on Eleanor's tearing a newspaper carrying the picture of Mussolini:

For when Eleanor, who used English so reticently, said 'damned' and then 'bully', it meant much more than the words she and her friends used. And her gesture, tearing the paper.... So she had seen her father rumple The Times and sit trembling with rage because somebody had said something in a newspaper. How odd!

The world of integrated people, who can express by a physical response their personal indignation at a public fact conveyed through an impersonal form of communication, no longer exists. If the first part of the novel reiterates the fact of personal death, the

last part poetically laments the demise of an age.

Virginia Woolf mentions in her diary that The Years is composed of two parts. The first portion of the book is narrative, while the second is the submerged side of the narrative. The literal fact of personal death carries the submerged implication of a more symbolic and more general death. The metaphoric implications give birth to the initial poetry of the novel. The deformities of people as depicted in the first part -- Colonel Abel's hand with its two missing fingers, Sara's deformed shoulders, etc. -- become the moral and emotional deformities of "I" and "my" in the second part of the novel. Similarly, communication in the first part of The Years takes the shape of abortive attempts of individuals to speak to one another in the second part. Maggie and Rose, Kitty and Eleanor experience this lack of real communication, when for them talk is "the only way we have of knowing each other."¹ In the second part of the novel Nicholas tries again and again to deliver a speech to express the general appreciation of the guests at the party. The speech is never made. The only formal public performance is given by a group of children who sing incoherently:

Etto passo tanto hai
Fai donk to tude....²

1 The Years, p. 48.

2 Ibid., p. 327.

The words and tune remain unrecognizable to the guests: "There was something horrible in the noise they made. It was so shrill, so discordant, and so meaningless."¹ That is an individual inadequacy in part one has become a common inadequacy in part two. This subtle relation between the narrative and the submerged reflection of the narrative enhances the poetic charm of this novel.

The surface of life described in The Years is both empty and ugly. The blob of spittle, the leering face, the cold slab of sausage, the noseless flower vendor, and the line of grease around the bathtub indicate an almost Swiftian revulsion of the human flesh. Sara tries to describe to Maggie what men in the future will say of their world of 1910:

"... people looking into this room -- this cave, this little entre, scooped out of mud and dung, will hold their fingers to their noses"-- she held her fingers to her nose -- "and say, 'Pah ! they stink!'"²

The echo of Hamlet's words to Horatio in the grave digging scene is central to the book as well as the scene. Surrounded by death, constantly thinking of death, Hamlet describes the human conditions, "And smelt so? Pah !" Similarly, encompassed by death, Virginia Woolf in The Years gives a poetic picture of

1 The Years, p. 327.

2 Ibid., p. 145.

the futility, poverty and drabness of human life. Like her own creation, Septimus, she has turned from the lyrical romantic Shakespeare whose spirit pervaded Night and Day to the Shakespeare who "loathed humanity", yet treated life poetically.

The Years is immensely poetic, when we consider the imaginative-creative use of language in it. Virginia Woolf is able to make us aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings, which form the substratum of our being. Even the bleak passages of the novel possess a vitality of language which reminds us of Dickens and Shakespeare in their grimmer mood. We may quote a few lines in this connection :

The smoke blowing through Peter Street had condensed, between the narrowness of the houses, into a fine grey veil.... Nothing whatever was happening; a few children were playing in the street, two cats turned something over in the gutter with their paws. Yet a woman leaning out of the window searched this way, that way, up and down the street as if she were raking every cranny for something to feed on. Her eyes, rapacious, greedy, like the eyes of a bird of prey, were also sulky and sleepy, as if they had nothing to feed their hunger upon. Nothing happened--nothing whatever.¹

The insipidity of this scene conceals an acrid but inchoate anger. The narrowing precincts create an

¹ The Years, pp. 75-6.

aura of growing claustrophobia in terse phrases. The comparatively shorter sentences gradually gain in length providing a background to the description of the leaning woman who assumes generic proportions. Her inimical hostile eyes take in everything -- the poor, deleterious states of being where nothing happens.

Virginia Woolf probes the semi-conscious of human beings with a thoroughness which we generally find in poetry. Without distinguishable stages or decoration she underlines the specific poetic tone of the mood by means of manipulation of language-tones. Let us quote another passage to explain this point further :

The sun was shining again; the damp pavements gleamed; a gust of wind tossed up the wet branches of the almond trees in the villa gardens; little twigs and tufts of blossom whirled on to the pavement and stuck there. As she stood still for a second at a crossing she seemed to be tossed aloft out of her usual surroundings. She forgot where she was. The sky, blown into a blue open space, seemed to be looking down not here upon streets and houses, but upon open country, where the wind brushed the moors, and sheep, with grey fleeces ruffled, sheltered under stone walls. She could almost see the moors brighten and darken as the clouds passed over them.¹

There is no obvious emphasis on the purely musical quality of words in the above-quoted passage. But sound as an essential element of the meaning is employed constantly in its rhythmic aspects, as is evident from

1 The Years, p. 58.

"a gust of wind", "the wind brushed," "sheep with grey fleeces ruffled," etc.. Virginia Woolf has a botanic eye for the detailed panorama of nature. She presents sensual visual images before us, very much in Laurentian manner. The confident, relaxed and leisurely echoing rhythms correspond to the regular rhythms of poetry. The emotive language presents the vivid impression of the spectacle of nature. The sentences move forth with lavish gestures, communicating figuratively Kitty's reactions in refreshing tones. The fecund tantalizing tones soon shift into a menagerie of suppressed emotions.

As a conscious artist, Virginia Woolf has rejuvenated language in a special way. The vitality of language can be traced throughout the novel. She draws more and more on the strength of language. In some passages we find the language in its full evocative charm. The supple movement of the lines, and an almost sensuous joy of comprehension often remind us of Keats and young Shakespeare. For example,

The clouds parting and massing let the light shine and then veiled it. The mud, now dark brown, now liquid gold, was splashed up by the wheels and hooves, and in the general churn and uproar the shrill chatter of the birds on the eaves was silenced. The hansom jingled and passed; jingled and passed.¹

1 The Years, p. 90.

Here, Virginia Woolf poetically uses light and shadow to portray the scene from a particular angle. The plastic use of colours gives a vivacity to it. The song of birds is subdued by the jingling of hansom cabs and we can "hear" the words as we read them. The meaning is suggested by the effect of recurring sounds.

In Virginia Woolf's novels we find a delicacy of treatment in short figurative sentences. The Years also abounds in beautifully poetic sentences. For example, "Immense reserves of emotion seemed to dwell in them";¹ or, "After the ball is over, after the dance is done -- like a serpent that swallowed its own tail, since the ring was complete from Hammersmith to Shore-ditch;"² or, "For some time the dappled iridescence of the sky remained unbroken. Then there was a puff of wind; and a little cloud crossed the moon."³ In these sentences the language not only expresses the mood, but also suggests certain attitudes on the part of the author. The sheer beauty of language leaves us enthralled. An equal mastery over handling the subject and emotions poetically is discernible in comparatively longer passages, such as the following one :

1 The Years, p. 93.

2 Ibid., p. 100.

3 Ibid., p. 106.

A crowd had gathered outside the public house. A man was being thrown out. There he came, staggering. He fell against a lamp-post to which he clung. The scene was lit up by the glare of the lamp over the public house door. Sara stood for a moment at the window watching them. Then she turned; her face in the mixed light looked cadaverous and worn, as if she were no longer a girl, but an old woman worn out by a life of childbirth, debauchery and crime. She stood there hunched up, with her hands clenched together.¹

The niggardly man staggering against the lamp-post in front of a public house is sketched in Dickensian way. It also prepares us for the sudden change in Sara's appearance. Watching the scene, she also becomes deathly pale and worn out, as if the sordidity of the scene has also been transferred to her. Sara's portrayal in these sentences reminds us of Ivich in Sartre's The Age of Reason :

And suddenly, when he saw Ivich, he felt as though he were experiencing a catastrophe. Ivich was a voluptuous and tragic little embodiment of pain, which had no morrow....²

Virginia Woolf's language possesses the power to startle us to a recognition of the eternal human fate in the mechanized world. Her poetic treatment of it reminds us of Dmitri Bilenskin's story "Born to Fly", in which the young hero desperately tries to recover

1 The Years, p. 145.

2 L'Âge de raison, Vol. I, trans. Eric Sutton (Penguin Books, 1964), p. 56.

from his dilemma in an abandoned junkyard.¹ The situation, and its consequent hopelessness are the same, though the authors view the human drama from different angles.

Like a true poet, Virginia Woolf possesses the power to convey a definite psychic state through the sheer presentation of scenic beauty.

Maggie crossed the room to shut the window. The great windows of the factory opposite were all lit up; it looked like a palace of glass with thin black bars across it. A glaze of yellow light lit up the lower halves of the houses opposite; the slate roofs shone blue, for the sky hung down in a heavy canopy of yellow light. Footsteps tapped on the pavement, for people were still walking in the street. Far off a voice was crying hoarsely.²

The scene conveys a hint of fatality. The sharp colours are a camouflage for the nagging loss of basic human values. The decrepit scene is sharp-edged in its blaring noise and glimmering light, but it lacks in sensitive aesthetic refinement. The sense of acute loss is conveyed in a delicate poetic way.

Virginia Woolf's presentation of jubilant moods is equally poetic in its recognition of the deeper emotion. In such passages, the language-tones assume a light-hearted cadence. For example,

1 Dmitri Bilenskin, "Born To Fly", Sovetskaya Literatura, No. 2 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), p. 72.

2 The Years, p. 147.

The boats were sailing; the men walking; the little boys dabbled in the pond for minnows; the waters of the pond rippled bright blue. Everything was full of the stir, the potency, the fecundity of spring.¹

However, the basic tone of the novel is not jubilant. Behind every joyous moment of being, an awareness of tragedy exists. The sense of the two forces of life and death being together is particularly dominant in the burial-scene of Eleanor's mother:

Earth dropped on the coffin; three pebbles fell on the hard shiny surface; and as they dropped she was possessed by a sense of something everlasting; of life mixing with death, of death becoming life. For as she looked she heard the sparrow's chirp quicker and quicker; she heard wheels in the distance sound louder and louder; life came closer and closer....²

The poetic suggestivity of this passage is self-evident. The repetition of words "quicker", "louder" and "closer" gives the impression of rapidly approaching life, which shall soon replace death. This is suggested by the imagery of birds and wheels, the two harbingers of delicate beauty and development. This suggestivity imparts a poetic beauty and tenderness to this passage.

In Virginia Woolf's other novels, a sense of one's involvement in the world is usually creative. But in The Years it results only in a sympathetic disintegra-

1 The Years, p. 108.

2 Ibid., p. 68.

tion and sordid selectivity. As Sara Fargiter lies awake, listening to the party noises, she becomes (as Louis does in The Waves) a root lying sunken inside the earth, and her veins thread the cold mass. Her acceptance of a cruel male phantom leads to a dead end. She does not even protest against it -- the narrow coffin is not only normal in her imagination, but is also comfortable.¹ There is no scope for any vision beyond this complete darkness.

This loss of meaning is complemented by the constant mimicry of people and gestures, confounding not only one's understanding of others, but also of one's own self. Mimicry destroys meaning, and pretence destroys any feeling language may convey. At her mother's funeral, Iella is initially attracted by the language of the Church. But soon she is disconcerted by the way her cousin James indulges in insincerity. She feels that he has "robbed her of the one feeling that was genuine."² The sense that things are spoilt is part of the general atmosphere of the novel. The world is repeatedly shown to be stained, dirty or deformed. However, the poetic treatment of this theme brings Virginia Woolf closer to the category of great novelists and story-tellers, who are capable of comprehending life itself poetically.

1 The Years, pp. 105-6.

2 Ibid., p. 68.

The theme of The Years and its treatment can be compared with that of Sartre's famous novel, The Age of Reason, published in 1945 :

Empty space. The body started off again, heavy and hot, with tremors and flushes of anger assailing the throat and stomach. But noone inhabited that body now. The streets were emptied as though their contents had been poured down a sink : something that a while ago had filled them had been swallowed up. The usual objects were still there, in fact, but they had all become disrupted, they depended from the sky like enormous stalactites, or towered upwards like fantastic dolmens. All their usual little appeals, their shrill cicadachirpings, had vanished into thin air, and were silent. A man's future had once challenged them, and they met it with a scatter of diverse temptations. That future was dead.¹

The Years is different from Virginia Woolf's other novels in the sense that it ultimately leaves us groping in the dark. It offers no transcendental vision which may help a reader to create something permanent amidst the haze of maudlin neurosis and pathetic dieblerie. The symbolism of the novel does not have the virility of other novels like To the Lighthouse, The Waves, or Mrs. Jalloway. In The Years, the emotive-creative use of language, suggestive presentation of emotions and the symbolic possibilities of imagistic patterns help in creating a resonant poetic atmosphere.

1 L'Âge de raison, p. 260.

However, the possibilities of the novel's poetic and esoteric interpretations leave us flabbergasted. The Years is deeply poetic in every way, though it presents the poetry at a different level of experience. We simply have to strive to understand the narrative itself before we can enjoy the underlying current of its poignant and melodious poetry.

Chapter VII

Between the Acts

The basic unity of Between the Acts, published posthumously, can only be understood through a comprehension of its underlying poetry. In fact, as Malcolm Cowley observes, "Between the Acts is the most lyrical of all her novels, not only in feeling but also in style."¹ In this novel, as in her other novels, poetry lies between the lines -- in the haunting overtones, in imagery, in her felicitous gift for metaphor, cadence, exciting associations, exquisite language, and mingling of drama and poetry, and in her power of absorption and distillation.

The narrative passages of Between the Acts are saturated with an emotional intensity and a disciplined freedom in the use of words. In the very beginning of the novel, we find a beautiful lyrical passage:

The words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream. But his snow-white breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed; and she too, in her webbed feet was entangled, by her husband, the stock-broker.²

¹ Malcolm Cowley, "Review", New Republic (New York; 6 October, 1941), p. 440.

² Between the Acts (London : Granada Publishing Ltd., 1982), p. 8.

The poetry lies in the lyrical presentation of the mind's 'soliloquy in solitude'. Isa's imagination separates her and Haines from the rest of the gathering, floating them away like two swans swimming downstream. The image of swans poetically suggests an ease, a grace and a perfectly natural harmony. But at the same time she is aware of her own incapability to react freely in the given calculus of relationships. Rupert Haines's face is beautifully mysterious to Isa, but his snow-white breast is encircled by a tangle of dirty duckweed, and her webbed feet are entangled by her husband. The passage presents, without any direct hint, the dilemma of Isa's situation -- her aspiration, as well as her recognition of her inability. This squelch in her fantasy, this frustration, arises from her recognition of the ultimate impossibility of the realisation of her day-dream, not only because of the actual circumstances of her life, but also because of the conditions of life itself. It is this recognition of the innermost emotions which gives a poetic note to the novel.

Virginia Woolf possesses a clear perceptive eye for minute details. The sheer ecstasy of being able to enjoy the panorama of nature is depicted exaltedly:

But it was summer now. She had been waked by the birds. Now they sang! attacking the dawn like so many choir boys attacking an iced cake.¹

¹ Between the Acts, p. 10.

Here, the comparison of birds with choir boys attacking an iced cake reveals the rapidity of oncoming morning eulogized by the song of birds. Again,

...over the edge he surveyed the landscape --
flowing fields, heath and woods. Framed,
they became a picture. Had he been a
painter, he would have fixed his easel here,
where the country, barred by trees, looked
like a picture. Then the breeze fell.¹

Old Oliver "achieves a framing effect by looking over the edge of his paper."² This view of Oliver takes the scene out of the sphere of possible action and removed us from the everyday instinctive vision dominated by practical purpose. This framing effect also enables us to grasp the sheer poetry which emanates from nature :

The drone of the trees was in their ears;
the chirp of birds; other incidents of
garden life, inaudible, invisible to her
in the bedroom, absorbed them. Isolated
on a green island, hedged about with snow-
drops, laid with a counterpane of puckered
silk, the innocent island floated under her
window.³

This short, graphic and deliberately poetical word-picture is suggestive of an emotion which is never directly communicated. The auditory image, and the

1 Between the Acts, p. 14.

2 Allen McLaurin, Virginia Woolf : The Echoes Enslaved
(Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 55.

3 Between the Acts, p. 15.

simple play of sound reassert the hidden poetry of the passage. The innocent island of children with their inherent oneness with nature is contrasted with the isolation of Isa in her secluded island of loneliness -- the two worlds do not intermingle. The sounds of garden inaudible to Isa remind us of Keats' "unheard melodies" and Eliot's "unheard music."

The poetry of Virginia Woolf's novels arises from this awareness of mingled ecstasy and sadness. The apparently perfect enjoyment of nature is tinged with an awareness of human suffering. The morning scene in Between the Acts is a case in point :

It was green in the garden; grey the next.
Here came the sun -- an illimitable rapture
of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf.
Then in compassion it withdrew, covering
its face, as if it forebore to look on human
suffering. There was a fecklessness, a
lack of symmetry and order in the clouds,
as they thinned and thickened. Was it their
own law, or no law, they obeyed? Some were
wisps of white hair merely. One, high up,
very distant, had hardened to golden alabaster;
was made of immortal marble. Beyond that
was blue, pure blue, black blue; blue that
had never filtered down; that had escaped
registration.¹

The continuing note of sadness in the passage and the presence of the consciousness of the transience of our life delineated figuratively suggest the idea of eternity reminding us of the theme of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The vivid picture of the sun and the

¹ Between the Acts, p. 21.

cloud is presented with a poet's skill for exact representation. The feeble, aimless design of clouds continually changes its pattern and colour. The alabasterine translucence of clouds sometimes thickens briskly into golden monolith and sometimes shows alicyclic patterns of quick mobility. Virginia Woolf has also made a clever use of colour impressionism in this passage -- green grey, black blue and pure blue capture the accurate shade of the moment. The presentation of natural mystery comes quite close to the Romantic tradition.

Virginia Woolf has made masterly use of colour impressionism at various places in this novel. For example,

The flower blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hell, leaf smelling, earth smelling of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire.¹

The passage is intensely lyrical. The words are soft and smooth, and the sentences possess a running rhythm. The "blazed" flowers are covered with a soft transparent velvety film and the earth smells of "yellow" light.

¹ Between the Acts; pp. 12-3.

Nature also influences human emotions and brings about a change in them. The recognition of oneness of all natural objects metamorphoses the inner darkness into an appreciation of beauty. In the early poetry of T.S. Eliot, yellow is negative, connected with sin, as evidenced by the "yellow fog" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". But in Virginia Woolf, as in Whitman, the positive side of yellow is emphasized. She has used colour expressively, making it an integral part of her theme and technique. For example,

There were pools of red and purple in the shade; flashes of silver in the sun. The dresses attracted the butterflies. Red and silver, blue and yellow gave off warmth and sweetness. Red Admirals gluttonously absorbed richness from dishcloths, cabbage whites drank icy coolness from silver paper. Flitting, tasting, returning, they sampled the colours.¹

The colours of nature are put in meaningful relation to the preparations for pageant. Virginia Woolf's use of colours corresponds to Cézanne's painting.² Roger Fry sees colours as performing a double function in a work of art;³ it can be both "plastic" and "decorative". Virginia Woolf has made the plastic use of colours in Between the Acts which further reveals her poetic approach

1 Between the Acts, p. 50.

2 Quoted by Roger Fry in Vision and Design (London : Chatto and Windus, 1926), p. 131.

3 Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics", Vision and Design, p. 31.

to fiction. (He has used colour to establish 'psychological volumes', as Maureen and Fry call it.

Virginia Woolf's imagery is capable of conveying the intense and fluctuating experience, sudden sharp recognitions, flows and ebbs of feelings and joy and pain. The exquisite image of Bond the coman suggests the timeless life of the farm-servant, and prepares us for the chorus of peasants who serve as a static background to the variegated scenery of the pageant :

He thought very little of anybody, simples or gentry. Leaning, silent, sardonic, against the door he was like a withered willow, bent over a stream, all its leaves shed, and in his eyes the whimsical flow of the waters.¹

The "withered willow" suggests a languishing, ageless creeper, which quietly witnesses the torrential water-flow symbolizing the capricious and swift ways of time. The indirect, suggestive nature of the imagery makes the passage highly poetic. Bond's figure of Biblical simplicity reminds us of Wordsworth's "The Cumberland Beggar," expressing his realisation of the "still sad music of humanity" as having "power to chasten and subdue."

Between the Acts has spells of loveliness and flashes of poetry that are typical of Virginia Woolf.

¹ Between the Acts, p. 24.

The following extract, which is just one of the numerous, serves to illustrate it:

There had always been lilies there, self-sown from wind-dropped seed, floating red and white on the green plates of their leaves. Water, for hundreds of years, had silted down into the hollow, and lay there four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud. Under the thick plate of green water, glazed in their self-centred world, fish swam — gold, splashed with white, streaked with black or silver. Silently they manoeuvred in their water world, poised in the blue patch made by the sky, or shot silently to the edge where the grass, trebling, made a fringe of nodding shadow. On the water-pavement spiders printed their delicate feet. A grain fell and spiralled down; a petal fell, filled and sank. At that the fleet of boat-shaped bodies paused; poised; equipped; sailed; then with a waver of undulation off they flashed.¹

The complex simplicity of this passage is noteworthy. The beauty of nature is wrapped with a mystery, which is suggested repeatedly with the help of "always", "hundreds of years", "black cushion of mud", "thick plate", "self-centred world", etc. It gives the lily-pond a particular value, a magical life of its own. But the mystery soon gives way to sheer sensuous delight and an exquisite description of the fish continues. The imaginative use of language further intensifies the poetry of the passage. The peaceful and joyous landscape

1 Between the Acts, pp. 35-6.

presented in the later part of the passage romanticizes the author's poetic mood. The movement of small creatures is depicted with a poetic accuracy. The blueness of sky casts its shadow in the pond, the edge of the pond is decorated with the moving shadows of grass-fringe and spider-webs and the boat-shaped creatures are punboling playfully, conveying a sense of swift movement and youthful exhilaration. The evocative language adds to the poetic charm of such lucid passages, of which we quote another example, "How tempting, how very tempting, to let the view triumph; to reflect its ripple; to let their own minds ripple; to let outlines elongate and pitch over -- so -- with a sudden jerk."¹ The word "ripple" is repeated twice, first to suggest the rhythmic movement of the scenery, and then to convey the corresponding reaction of minds. The repetition underlines an interaction of the two which gradually emerges out of the rhythm of the sentences.

In Between the Acts, Virginia Woolf carries the oppression of The Years to its conclusion and shows how imagination can develop fully within the restrictions of life. Most of the characters speak like real people, but Virginia Woolf resorts again and again to the non-realistic convention of The Waves to achieve the expressive intensity of poetry. Isabel, a significant character in the novel, talks to herself in a kind of free verse:

¹ Between the Acts, p. 52.

town the ride, that leads under the
nut tree and the may tree, away,
till I come to the wishing well,
where the washer-women's little boy
--- she dropped sugar, two lumps, into
her tea, 'dropped a pin. He got his
horse, so they say. But what wish
should I drop into the well?' 'He
looked round.'¹

Virginia Woolf has successfully captured the rhythm of
disjointed mental process. Like Coleridge, she also
knows how to make use of vagueness. The depth and
silence of Isa's heart are captured beautifully. Not
only the inner flow of her ideas, but also the external
shaping of imagery is deeply poetic:

'There', Isa mused, 'would the dead
leaf fall, when the leaves fall, on the
water. Should I mind not again to see
may tree or nut tree? Not again to hear
on the trembling spray the thrush sing,
or to see, dipping and diving as if he
skinned waves in the air, the yellow
woodpecker?'²

Or, again,

'Alone, under a tree, the withered
tree that keeps all day murmuring of
the sea, and hears the Rider gallop...'³

These instances reveal the fact that Virginia Woolf
seems to be content with the senses and felt experiences,
which form the essence of poetry. We are amazed by
the richness of her sensuous endowment, a sensibility

1 Between the Acts, p. 78.

2 Ibid., p. 79.

3 Ibid.

that shows itself in a wealth of sensuous perceptiveness that places her beside the young Shakespeare and F. H. Lawrence.

Ira is ensnared in a petty, limited domesticity. She chats to her father-in-law about the fish they will have for lunch, about the price of veal, and about her son. She is "pegged down on a chair arm, like a captive balloon, by a myriad of hair-thin ties into domesticity."¹ Her fondness for the word 'abortive' further marks her attitude towards life and society. To a great extent, her imagination remains mere day-dream, and registers her inability either to accept or to change her life. The need for fantasy guides her reading and her interest in books in general, her fantasy being a powerful need. She runs her eye over the books in the library as a person with a raging tooth runs his eye over bottles in a chemist's to see if one of them can provide a cure.² She chooses elements from various news items to construct a fantasy about a guard, and interposes real events in parenthesis. The external world is viciously repetitive; day-dream alone gives the impression of variety. And when imagination is day-dream rather than the vital perception of Mrs. Falloway or the perceptive sympathy of Mrs. Ramsay, there will

1 Between the Acts, p. 17.

2 Ibid., p. 18.

naturally be a gap between imagination and reality. Isa's bitterness is frequently caused by this discrepancy.

Virginia Woolf's poetic sensibility grasps everything fully well, including the remote which is extremely acute in intensity, and the untouched questions of sense and sensitivity. Isa's mutterings seem incoherent and unlinked to the main stream of the novel, but their importance dawns on us gradually as the novel progresses. Isa's character can be compared with that of Asya, the heroine of Turgenev's story of the same name, written in 1857. Like Turgenev, Virginia Woolf also presents lyrically the conflicts in personal relationships, and the wavering mental state of a young woman who is extremely sincere and at the same time, to her own amazement, a sham in the given circumstances. Asya's love for H.R., the hero of the story, can be compared with Isa's love for Haines which is felt poignantly, but a love which cannot be reciprocated in the social set-up. Isa's mutterings to herself which Lodge penetrates at once again remind us of Asya, who also recites haphazard lines of poetry in her mental agony, and is being constantly checked by Gegin. Asya's "where is the cross, the shadow of the bough ...", etc. reminds us of "Alone, under a tree, the withered tree that keeps all day murmuring of the sea, and hears the Rider gallop..."¹

1 Between the Acts, p. 79.

Indeed, Virginia Woolf is a lyricist in subject matter and manner. The historical pageant is written chiefly in verse, the characters in their private meditations are always breaking into verse, and even the simple narrative passages have an emotional intensity which is an attribute of a poet. Moreover, she employs symbols almost as abundantly as Yeats does in his later work. The first scene in the book is a meeting to discuss a new cesspool for the village -- nobody can overlook the meaning here, and the pageant is being held to buy a new lighting system for the church. It is enacted by the villagers themselves as if to indicate the continuity of English life. The village idiot wanders across the scene, playing no one but himself, and hence the last tableau is entitled "The Present Time -- Ourselves". This poetic novel, thus, is able to deal with an enormously complex group of relationships, not plausible in ordinary fiction. It is Virginia Woolf's realization of emotions underlying the apparent attitude of the people which gives an extra poetic dimension to her novels. The relationships are analyzed within a pattern of dramatic conflict which amounts to poetic tension. The poetic pattern also enables the novelist to see the outline when the large drama of life in Between the Acts faces the formalized dress of art, and this naturally assumes symbolic significance.

Like her great contemporaries Eliot and Yeats, Virginia Woolf also polemically responds to the demands of time. The spirit of war broods over the novel. The book is her comment on the war, or rather her elegy on the society the war was destroying. Mockery -- that is, the refusal to give sympathy to individual responses -- stems from a belief in the reality of reason, but reason is shown to permit all sorts of stupidities. Old Oliver applauds Reason as she steps on to the pageant stage;¹ but this Reason is a complacent and mute observer of greed, lust and farcical connivance. Lucy Swithin, who is able to increase the bounds of the present by adventures into the past and future and walks as if the floor were fluid, wears a crucifix, which William Lodge sees as a stamp on her volatile nature. Yet this apparent limitation is a protection against her brother's mockery. Mr. Oliver, who has some of the masculine egoism accompanying the mental precision of Mr. Ramsay, tries to frustrate the flights of his sister's religious fantasy, which is, despite some ridiculous aspects, a true religious sensibility.

Unlike War and Peace, Between the Acts presents the very quintessence of a panoramic view of life. Therefore, in it, Virginia Woolf uses a different form and a new technique which includes "both extremes of

¹ Between the Acts, p. 99.

poetic intensity and discursive prose",¹ to express the full gamut of emotions, and to embody her vision of variegated life, which, to quote from her diary, is composed of "all life, all art, all waifs and strays - a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole..."² Her poetry emanates not only from the rhythm and rhyme of the melodious language, but also from its evocative, imaginative use, reminding us of Shakespeare and Blake. The evocative rhythm of the language transforms even the normal happenings of the day into something mysterious:

The nurses after breakfast were trundling
the perambulator up and down the terrace;
and as they trundled they were talking -
not shaping pellets of information or handing
ideas from one to another, but rolling words,
like sweets on their tongues; which, as they
thinned to transparency, gave off pink, green,
and sweetness.³

The poetry lies in the purity of style. The vivid impression of easy talk is conveyed with a smoothness of phrases and a rich splash of colours. Yet the nurses fail to realise the potential of language. The nurses, as they so lovingly roll out their words do not exchange information. In the same manner, Oliver believes that treasures are released when great names are mentioned; and to Miss La Trobe, at the end of the pageant, it

1 N.C. Thakur, The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf (London : Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 142.

2 A Writer's Diary (London : Triad Crafton, 1985), p. 276.

3 Between the Acts, pp. 11-2.

seems that from the fertile mud round, her words rise above the dumb oxen -- though wonderful, they are 'words without meaning'. Lucy Swithin repeats to herself that we 'haven't the words', and concludes that it is not on the lips but behind the eyes that true emotion is communicated. Unlike The Years, this novel insists that there is something real to be communicated, but language is always insufficient to do so. The language used by the minor characters is that of conventional phrases and greetings. Mrs. Sands tells Mrs. Swithin that her nephew, who is apprenticed to a butcher, has been cheeking the master, and Mrs. Swithin says, 'That'll be all right', half referring to the boy, and half referring to the neat, trimmed triangular sandwich she has been making.¹ When Isa sees her husband flirting with Mrs. Manress, "the wild child of nature," she exclaims, "Oh, that idiot!" and her companions believe that she is referring to the idiot in the play which every traditional play must have. The widow Fitty Springett says that it is cheap and nasty, referring to the play, but she shoots a vicious glance at Lodge's green trousers, yellow spotted tie and unbuttoned waistcoat. Because individual imagination is separate from the shared language, the remarks of the characters are often misunderstood. The dilemma of the characters and

¹ Between the Acts, p. 29.

their inability to express the "felt" emotions reminds us of the twentieth century poets, particularly T.S. Eliot.

But this very vagueness of reference is an essential part of the meaning projected by the pageant, which depicts the audience's basic possibilities as a part of their reality. The figure of Miss La Trobe presents the predicament of the isolated artist:

Now Miss La Trobe stepped from her hiding. Flowing and streaming, on the grass, on the gravel, still for one moment she held them together - the dispersing company. Hadn't she, for twenty-five minutes, made them see? A vision imparted was relief from agony... for one moment... one moment. Then the music petered out on the last word we. She heard the breeze rustle in the branches. She saw Giles Oliver with his back to the audience. Also Cobbet of Cobbs Corner. She hadn't made them see. It was a failure, another damned failure! As usual. Her vision escaped her.¹

These moments of personal grief become actual and immediate, and assume shape and substance through the exact combination of rhythm and images. The imaginative sense of life lifts the grim scene into fantastic poetry. Miss La Trobe realizes that personal and artistic success, even survival, are contingent upon some kind of reintegration of herself into society. Her sense of frustration is conveyed to her audience as well. Giles, annoyed with everyone and everything, rambles towards

1 Between the Acts, pp. 7-5.

the Barn. In his annoyance, he kicks a stone along the path. In the presence of Mrs. Manresa, he is afraid of not being manly. His kicking the stone symbolically suggests not only his irritability, but also his immaturity, his not being manly. The stone is a "sharp stone, edged as if cut by a savage for an arrow. A barbaric stone; a pre-historic."¹ files, thus, shows the beastly side of his nature. He is also immediately linked to another era, since "stone-kicking was a child's game."² He gives the stone ten kicks to reach the gate:

The first kick was Manresa (lust). The second, Lodge (perversion). The third himself (Coward). And the fourth and the fifth and all the others were the same.

He reached it in ten. There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die.³

He stamps on them. By this action he superficially proves to himself that he can act and impress Mrs. Manresa. She feels 'flattered' by this action. But this image also re-creates the sense of horror of the contemporary situation, which is barren and can give

1 Between the Acts, p. 75.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

birth only to a "monstrous inversion". The act of crushing them constitutes a mental release for Giles, establishing at the same time the validity of the evolutionary theory. In this description every gesture, every thought functions symbolically and adds to the density of details. The successful placing of this incident in a whirlpool of complex relationships is an evidence of Virginia Woolf's psycho-poetic apprehension of the human psyche. The description of the landscape, thus, becomes part of Septimus Warren Smith's violent world. Like Septimus, Giles is angry at society for failing to realize the violence it has inflicted on its people. However, his anger itself is a wish to inflict the same violence on society, whereas Septimus's wish is to preserve himself from violence. While the villagers are thinking about the loveliness of the view, Giles is thinking about the sixteen men who have just been flown across the gulf. He even expects to be admired for his disgusting cruelty towards the snake.

What makes Virginia Woolf so important in the history of the poetic novel is her probing of everything related to man. Her thematic interest in the poetic world -- i.e., a world inspired by covert psychological development of emotion -- compels her to envisage a new technique.

Between the Acts is intense and lyrical, even "purple". Like poetry it deals with not only people's relations to each other and their activities together, but also with the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. It delineates not only a character's relation to nature, his imagination and dreams, but also the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life.

The complexity and sneer of the world are presented through the images of loneliness devoid of individual personalities. The characters see their loneliness in a crowded world, while the author presents the world itself as lonely. For example,

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent,
silent. The room was a shell, singing
of what was before time was; a vase stood
in the heart of the house, alabaster,
smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled
essence of emptiness, silence.¹

The image of the vase, a form which encloses nothing and which has no 'content', illustrates with its three-fold repetition the emptiness at the heart of life which must be given shape and form. The image offers a fine expression of the static, haunted loneliness the characters only half-consciously endure. Also, the society cannot, in any way, assuage their loneliness, for they want to

1 Between the Acts, p. 31.

be alone -- some part of them needs solitude. As Old Oliver, Isa and Lucy Swithin meet Mrs. Menresa and Dodge, the confrontation is like running into a rock; their initial response is outrage: "Utterly impossible was it, even in the heart of the country, to be alone?"¹ However, gradually they see the encounter as a pleasant diversion, for people are drawn together by the same instinct that makes cows and sheep seek physical propinquity. The characters illustrate Schopenhauer's fable of the porcupine who seeks company for warmth and then, driven mad by the discomfort of other porcupines' spikes, flees into isolation until driven mad by loneliness and cold, he forgets his past experience of companionship and again eagerly seeks it. As the characters wait for the pageant to begin, the inactivity which is pleasant in solitude becomes a burden, and they look for ways to camouflage their desires to slip back into their private sleepy thoughts :

 Their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough. We aren't free, each one of them felt separately to feel or think separately, nor yet to fall asleep. We're too close; but not close enough. So they fidgeted.²

The claustrophobia reminds us typically of Jimmy Porter, the hero of Osborne's Look Back in Anger. The

1 Between the Acts, p. 31.

2 Ibid., pp. 51-2.

society in Between the Acts also thwarts the individual vision. Isabella, as she sits among the audience of the village population, feels imprisoned, with the bars deflected by a haze of sleep. Her desire for a glass of cold water dominates her imagination. She sees "water surrounded by walls of shining glass."¹ The vividness and glamour of her vision, alongside the pettiness of the desire, is certainly comic, and the pathos of that comedy arises from her inability to imagine, in broad or profound terms, what it is to be free. Water is Isa's image of release. Her belief that people are a hundred miles from the sea is one aspect of her apprehension, as is her continuous worry that the fish they eat will not be fresh. Isa's falling in love with Giles and their ultimate marriage are also delineated symbolically:

They had met first in Scotland, fishing -- she from one rock, he from another. Her line had got tangled; she had given over, and had watched him with the stream rushing between his legs, casting, casting -- until, like a thick ingot of silver bent in middle, the salmon had leapt, had been caught, and she had loved him.²

The salmon's leaping and getting entangled symbolizes Isa's love and getting married. However, life in Points Hall becomes a set routine and "the mirror that reflected the soul sublime, reflected also the soul

1 Between the Acts, p. 52.

2 Ibid., p. 39.

bored."¹ Unlike Clarissa Falloway's, her rhymes are not symbolic of any deep meaning. They reflect her unfulfilled desires and passions. Her desire for the gentleman farmer and lodge also remains unfulfilled. The complexity of her mental state is presented in a dramatic-poetic manner. The fragments of poetry come from the disturbance of mind.

Besides the images of loneliness and claustrophobia, images of death permeate both the actual and the dream world of the novel. Old Mr. Oliver's dog is like a stone-figure guarding, even in the realms of death, the sleep of his dreaming master. "But the master was not dead; only dreaming, drowsily, seeing as in a glass, its lustre spotted, himself, a young man helmeted...."² The characters' alienation from natural life and their bondage to convention enrage them. Giles feels himself to be "manacled to a rock" and "forced passively to behold indescribable horror", as he observes the commonplace quality of life.³ His wife, understanding his state, can only express her response by turning over a coffee cup, only that slight breach of etiquette seems possible to her.

1 Between the Acts, p. 16.

2 Ibid., p. 17.

3 Ibid., pp. 47-8.

T. S. Eliot once remarked about Baudelaire that he elevates and intensifies his imagery based on the sordid, common life, to such a level of awareness that it represents something much more than itself. By its very intensity, such imagery becomes a mode of release and expression for other men. In the pageant Virginia Woolf presents historical and literary facts as they are, but at the same time makes them embody something much more than what they are. And gradually the factual events of the pageant become symbolic of her own ideas. The creative mind of Miss La Trobe wants to re-create her vision of life by combining things. The pageant thus becomes a means of suggesting "the things that lie beneath the semblance of the thing."

Virginia Woolf's exhaustive use of imagery constitutes the continuous poetic charm in her novels. She has drawn images not only from the world of nature and man, but also from the world of animals. The animal imagery of Between the Acts enforces the characters' pre-historic natures. Lucy Swithin has knobbed shoes, as if she had claws like a canary's. Hens stare at the barn where the pageant is being held, and cows stray past and participate in the emotion of the play. The barn built over seven hundred years ago evokes the memories of a Greek temple, inhabited by animal-gods --

mice, swallows and a stray bitch -- whose eyes are as keen as those of human beings. The animal imagery shows the falsity of the so-called social respectability and dignity of convention. The pigeons are described as ladies in ornate ball dresses, mincing tiny steps on their little pink feet.¹ The swallows, retreating and advancing, form the melodic movements of the pageant's music, while the trees present what is fluid in the pageant's atmosphere. But the animal imagery of this novel does not have the reductive effect it has in The Years.

In Between the Acts, Virginia Woolf is possessed by the sense of time. In Orlando and The Years she treats time in its historical perspective; while in Mrs. Dalloway, Jacob's Room and The Waves, she paints the effect of inner durée on an individual's perspective. But in Between the Acts she "not only records inner, clock and historical time, but also brings in prehistoric time."² Her comprehensive vision of time results in a mature vision of life and reality in this novel. But she does not cope with time "as a Tolstoy did, or even a Proust; she felt it too poetically."³ It is more like

1 Between the Acts, p. 76.

2 H. C. Thakur, The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf, pp. 41-42.

3 Louis Kronenberger, "Review", Nation (New York : 11 October, 1941), pp. 344-45.

the triumph of the poet over the novelist. The cleverly parodied literary styles of the pageant themselves become a symbol of the change from age to age. But there is a basis of permanence beneath the flux. Though there are outward signs of change, people still dig and delve, make love and die; as the chorus of villagers do, "we act different parts, but are the same." Lady Harpy Hensden was once a Canterbury pilgrim, and Mrs. Hardcastle was a viking. The same drama goes on in the audience. Lucy Swithin looks for unity between 'mind time' and 'clock time', reads the Outline of History, and sees a harmony between the past and the present, between the seen and the unseen, for she belongs to the category of people given to unity. Isa, caught in the chaos of flux and change, seeks a place of stasis, "unblowing, ungrowing are the roses there. Change is not; nor the mutable, nor the lovable...."¹ But she is trapped into the webs of the mutable, and the constantly shifting patterns of the fabric keep on including and excluding Giles, Mrs. Menress, William Fodge and herself. Every thing seems to be so varied, so changeable, so fragmented, and so liquid. But paradoxically change is always the same. Looking at the play, Isa asks if the Victorians were like that ;

¹ Between the Acts, p. 155.

The Victorians... I don't believe...
that there ever were such people.
Only you and me and William dressed
differently.¹

The pageant thus crystallizes, and gives stasis to the flow of time which the audience senses but cannot make stand-still.

Behind Virginia Woolf's work lies a very definite philosophical outlook -- empirical and not explicitly a-priori. Both she and Proust feel that they live the very moment of the aesthetic experience, the moment when something in the flux of things suddenly shifts into position, and puts the whole of the being into focus before it uncoils and winds on its way. In both there is an element of waiting for the moment, a sort of passivity. This is evident in the symbolism of the two pictures in Between the Acts, "In real life they had never met, the long lady and the man holding his horse by the rein."²

Between the Acts possesses the unconscious stillness, concentration and the resulting beauty, which Virginia Woolf so much praises in Wordsworth's work.³ At the time of writing Between the Acts, she also wrote two articles, "The Man at the Gate" and "The Leaning

1 Between the Acts, p. 127.

2 Ibid., p. 30.

3 A Writer's Diary, p. 300.

Tower", which show that she was obsessed with the problem of self-consciousness -- a concern which Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf and F. H. Lawrence have in common. It was reinforced by her reading of Coleridge. The pageant of Miss La Trobe analytically approaches the truth. The truth is broken into splinters, and the disjointed language parenthetically mirrors the meaning. We may quote a few lines to elucidate it :

Look ! Out they come, from the bushes
-- the riff-raff. Children? Imps - elves
- demons. Holding what ? Tin cans?
Bedroom candlesticks? Old jars? My dear,
that's the cheval glass from the Rectory !
And the mirror -- that I lent her. My
mother's. Cracked. What's the notion?
Anything that's bright enough to reflect,
presumably, ourselves?

Ourselves ! Ourselves !¹

The special outcry of the modern age is seen in its fragmentation, presented in the jazz and a revolving glass scattering its piece-meal images :

Out they leapt, jerked, skipped.
Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping.
Now old Bert... he was caught. Now
Manressa. Here a nose... There a
skirt... Then trousers only... Now
perhaps a face... Ourselves? But
that's cruel. To snap us as we are,
before we've had time to assume...

And only, too, in parts... That's
what's so distorting and upsetting
and utterly unfair.²

1 Between the Acts, p. 133.

2 Ibid.

The revolving of the glass stops when the young man carrying it runs out of muscle and the audience is shown a reflection of the entire scene -- "not whole by any means, but at any rate standing still."¹

The novel is suffused with a lyrical optimism, which can only be compared with that of Turgenev's story "After Death". Virginia Woolf stresses that even apparently hopeless fragmentation can be integrated, and that the ridiculous, licentious and greedy people -- the people of England throughout her history -- displayed in the pageant, have something in them that refuses to be sold. A familiar contrapuntal work is played upon, one note points to another, one note reveals another; wrestling with meaning which is finally comprehended. This is also Lucy Swithin's vision when she looks into the Lily pond and sees 'ourselves' in the fish (and Giles has seen himself as a fish caught in water); there she retrieves "some glint of faith from the grey waters, hopefully, without such help from reason, she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched; seeing in that vision beauty, power and glory in ourselves."²

The pageant has the revitalising force of great art. Miss La Trobe feels that there is always another play within the play she has just written. The confused

1 Between the Acts, p. 135.

2 Ibid., pp. 148-49.

execution of the play acts as an artistic asset, for the characters see themselves in the pageant as they might see themselves in a Rorschach test. The novel poetically presents a possibility of a new type of integration of a decaying society. Like a true poet she envisages a 'vision' -- a new and unique phenomenon -- with psychological insight, the comparisons and similes are precise, and enrich the poetry of her style. The comparison of the flight of twelve aero-planes with "a flight of wild duck"¹, or phrases like "she led them down green glades into the heart of silence,"² are a case in point. In the longer passages the fanciful imagination takes its full swing:

Then suddenly the starlings attacked the tree behind which she had hidden. In one flock they pelted it like so many winged stones. The whole tree hummed with the whizz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabbling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up ! then off ! 3

The very tone and rhythms of the lines suggest the startled flight of the birds, which surround the tree and metamorphose it into a living rhapsody of life. The

1 Between the Acts, p. 740.

2 Ibid., p. 40.

3 Ibid., p. 152.

words "whizz", "buzz", "vibrant", "quivering" indicate the restlessness and continuous motion of birds. For a moment the tree itself becomes a living symbol of life. The richness of effect, the subtlety of appeal and, above all, the symbolism of sound lend a deeply poetic touch to this passage. The feeling of life is figuratively imparted to the tree, which in itself becomes a symbol of eternal life.

Miss La Trobe wants to escape her sense of futility by taking refuge in the self-effacing atmosphere of bar: "...she saw the red curtain at the bar window. There would be shelter; voice; oblivion. She turned the handle of the public house door. The sordid smell of stale beer saluted her; and voices talking."¹ Life is soaked in frustration at every level and the facade of words is incapable of hiding it. The dilemma of being aloof is sketched in brief, sharp tones. The simplicity of the language appeals at once, since it reveals the bare failure of the soul without any pretence:

Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowned; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning -- wonderful words.²

1 Between the Acts, p. 153.

2 Ibid.

Miss Le Trobe's escape exposes her weakness. Her final evasion reminds us of the ultimate evasion of Eliot's Prufrock. The phraseology is also close to Eliot's terse verse.

In Between the Acts, the descriptions of nature are suffused with an inner glory. The emotions of human psyche are imparted to natural sights and scenes figuratively. For example,

Lucy returned from her voyage into the picture and stood silent. The sun made each pane of her glasses shine red. Silver sparkled on her black shawl. For a moment she looked like a tragic figure from another play.¹

Lucy Swithin's symbolic inward voyage gives her a certain poise, which is shown through nature-imagery. The details are carefully painted. The light of the sun has transformed the glass-panes into a shining red beauty and against this illuminated background Lucy Swithin achieves tragic dimensions. Virginia Woolf's ability to present the subtlety of emotional chaos imparts a poetic depth to the description. Lucy Swithin is the least intellectual character in the novel. Yet like Mrs. Ramsay, Fleanor, and even Mrs. Hilbery, she gives us an insight into the novelist's vision of life by her naive simplicity.

¹ Between the Acts, p. 155.

Again, human emotions gain intensity by the similar background of natural phenomenon :

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Cile too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was the night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke.¹

This change in natural background presents a change in human emotions also. The darkness of the sky casts a primitive shadow on the scenery. Isa and Cile are ready to develop an understanding. The primeval setting indicates, besides a basic change of emotions, an eternity of relationship between man and woman.

Even the descriptions of ordinary incidents in Between the Acts become suffused with a marked lyricism by the way they are presented :

The wild child, afloat once more on the tide of the old man's benignity, looked over her coffee cup at Cile, with whom she felt in conspiracy. A thread united them - visible, invisible, like those threads, now seen, now not, that unite trembling grass blades in autumn before the sun rises.²

1 Between the Acts, pp. 158-59.

2 Ibid., p. 45.

The imagery of thread can be traced in almost all the novels of Virginia Woolf. The mental harmony between Giles and Mrs. Manresa is presented poetically through this image. The vibrant thread which unites them is delicate and soft like a "trembling grass blade in autumn before the sun rises." The tenderness of the image touches us deeply. The image of thread recurs throughout the novel, imparting a tender poetic intensity to the prose narrative. Again,

It was an awkward moment. How to make an end? Whom to thank? Every sound in nature was painfully audible; the swish of the trees; the gulp of a cow; even the skim of the swallows over the grass could be heard. But no one spoke. Whom could they make responsible?†

The audible sounds of nature juxtapose and increase the poignancy of human silence. The choice of echoing words shows that Virginia Woolf has an acute and discriminating ear for the sounds of nature. Where the average person would hear nothing but undifferentiated buzz, she, like Hardy, can distinguish the individual notes making up the total harmony. The sound-effects in the above-quoted extract can be compared with those of the opening para of Hardy's Under the Greenwood Tree:

† Between the Acts, p. 141.

To dwellers in a wood, almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall.¹

Virginia Woolf also exploits the sounds of the individual words. Underlying Mr. Streetfield's confusion about the conclusion of his speech, the word-sounds show that everything is tense as if aware of some impending mysterious event. His confusion is shared not only by the audience, but also by the natural objects surrounding him.

The device of repetition is inalienable from her craftsmanship. In Between the Acts, the phrase "orts, scraps and fragments" is repeated twice. But the repetition is never mechanical. It retains the vitality of inaugurating sensations. Her poetic apprehension of facts enables her to represent exactly the horizon of human psyche, so familiar and so perpetually exploited, and yet so mysterious and delicate. Her language and style befit the inherent poetry of her way of comprehension, and her deeper music of words and sounds. The following extract from the novel will serve to illustrate it:

1 Thomas Hardy, Under the Greenwood Tree (London : Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1973), p. 11.

Looking up she received two great blots of rain full in her face. They trickled down her cheeks as if they were her own tears. But they were all people's tears, weeping for all people. Hands were raised. Here and there a parasol opened. The rain was sudden and universal. Then it stopped. From the grass rose a fresh earthy smell.¹

The recognition of the universal suddenly dawns upon Isa. The sudden freshness of emotions is re-asserted by the freshness of nature -- rain and grass. The fountains of love and joy are within her, but are blocked by the intricacy of her own thoughts. The universal rain rouses (as it rouses the mariner of Coleridge) her vitality and buoyancy. Virginia Woolf's sedate music and dream-like imagery add to the overall poetic charm of her writing, but it is her compassion for the human misery which imparts a loftiness to her picture of life:

But now that the shower had fallen, it was the other voice speaking, the voice that was no one's voice. And the voice that wept for human pain unending said....²

Virginia Woolf's urge to analyse spiritual process in depth is implicit everywhere, though it makes her picture of the world very complex. When Miss La Trobe feels that she has failed in her experience, she faces the audience, though unable to lift her hand: "Blood seemed to pour from her shoes. This is death,

1 Between the Acts, p. 131.

2 Ibid.

death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind...."¹

The poetic intensity of this scene may be compared with that of the scene in Dostoyevsky's The Insulted and Humiliated in which Natasha is feverishly pacing up and down a room, hearing the jingling of bells and brooding over the misery and loneliness of the present.

Between the Acts reminds us of Nekrasov's criticism of Turgenev in the spring of 1857. The tone of Turgenev's stories compels him to say that after Pushkin "he is more of a poet than all the Russian writers taken together."² The same may be said about Virginia Woolf. With her amazing command of form, and a perfect ear for every change of tone, her prose narratives are saturated with suggestive poetry. While Mrs. Palloway throbs with an inner rhythm and a portrayal of an impending catastrophe, Between the Acts is radiant with blossoming nature. The Pointz-Hall has a fairy-tale loveliness, where the sunset is a burnished red and the scintillating air is silver, gold and crimson. Like Goethe's Faust, Between the Acts also postulates that the cornerstone of man is not he himself, as an indivisible unit, but mankind or society. That has its own eternal and immutable laws. Every development of the story leads to

1 Between the Acts, p. 131.

2 Quoted by Dmitry Uraev in "The Lesson of the Russian Master", Ivan Turgenev : Three Short Novels, trans. Olga Sharova (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 14.

the inevitable denouement, and at the same time it paints the fleeting illumination of some new, unexpected side of the characters.

Despite being somewhat baffling, Between the Acts is a masterpiece. It is one of the most symbolical of Virginia Woolf's novels. Its dialogues have the qualities of a symbolic lyric. In a word, the poetic strain in Between the Acts is very prominent. The message which this book communicates is also highly poetic and prophetic: "It was in the giving that the triumph was."¹

¹ Between the Acts, p. 151.

Chapter VIII

Summing Up

An attempt has been made in the foregoing chapters to trace and examine the presence of the poetic element in the novels of Virginia Woolf. In fact, she has woven a conscious poetry into the fabric of her fictional work. To grasp the meaning of her novels fully, one must understand the interdependence of her apparent novel structure and the rhythms of the underlying poetry. The poetic note in her writings contributes to the intensity of the process of composition, and to the concentrated fusion of emotions, which create a resonant poetic atmosphere in her novels.

With the beginning of the present century the analysis of the inner life of human beings became an end in itself for many writers, particularly those close to Virginia Woolf. Used as a functional device, the deployment of the wealth of inner human experiences structurally adds a poetic dimension to Virginia Woolf's novels. She delves deep into the individual psychology, unravelling the complex coils of the process of association. Her poetic presentation of human psyche is a significant attempt to explore artistically the entire

complexity of man's inner life, not only of his consciousness, but of all that of which he remains unaware, living in the depths of his subconscious.

Her conviction that "the outer crust of the self, one's personality, is a finely tuned mechanism, sensitive as a seismograph to the slightest vibration in the social environment, and hence volatile like the flux and multiplicity of experience to which it is exposed, inspired a particular concern in her novels with just those moments when identities are created out of situations and relationships through the chameleon transformations of the responsive personality."¹ The idea of this privileged moment when a spiritually transcendent truth is perceived in a flash of intuition is poetically presented in her novels. Her basically poetic approach to life enables her to convey authentically the two levels of being -- the surface and the depths.

To give her novels a poetic basis was a necessity for Virginia Woolf: she stresses the "secret places of the heart."² The psyche of her characters trembles on the verge of half-apprehended self-discovery, which can be shown directly only through poetry. In The Voyage Out and Night and Day she establishes the need

1 Jeanne Schulkind, Introduction to Virginia Woolf : Moments of Being (Britain : Triad/Granada, 1982), p. 17.

2 Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf (London : Longmans, Green and Co., 1962), p. 20.

for the development of individual sensibility through traditional plots. But from Jacob's Room onward's, her novels cease to have plots in the conventional sense. She becomes more and more interested in the inner glow and gloom of the personality which a novelist, like a painter, should be able to depict in a moment of time. To describe, like Dostoyevsky, the motives and subconscious urges of man, she develops and employs technical devices, experimenting with language to present it in an emotive-creative way. To delineate the human psyche poetically she uses simultaneity and repetition (instead of sequence and linear time), which are the facts of life. The abandonment of linear time leads to the adoption of a repetitive pattern, where representation takes triangular form, a form used by the post-impressionists in their mature works. The triangular combination of characters in her novels also wards off representational fidelity. By concentrating on problems of form, including repetition, which is one of the most basic patterns of meaning and significance, Virginia Woolf is able to include a wider phenomenon of problems in her novels. Her poetic method helps us to grasp the impossibility of knowing Man fully, and shows us how unfathomable human being is, how chaotic his feelings are, and how much there is in him that is contradictory and beyond understanding. The underlying poetic current in her novels

presents the true state of being in which "...all particularity that had been regarded as eternal becomes transient, the whole of nature is shown as moving in eternal flux and cyclical course."¹ Consequently, the dissatisfaction which many people feel with life is represented in Virginia Woolf's novels with a poetic poignancy. Septimus Smith, for example, is a victim of the destructive aspects of War. His lack of feeling indicates a general deadness in the present times. His bewilderment represents not merely his individual claustrophobia, but also a note of definite protest against man's overwhelming insuperable loneliness in a hostile world, and against a sense of personal alienation, standardization, automation of man and his subordination to things.² The suggestive delineation of these emotions imparts a poetic charm to the novel. The phrase, 'He felt nothing' is constantly reiterated in the novel. He sees events from the outside, without emotion or participation. Even his wife's sob's become banalistic repetition, and his own actions are mechanically empty.

The whole design of The Waves, too, arises from the poetic employment of repetition and rhythm. There is

1 M. Karateev, "So, It Isn't too early", Literaturnoe Obozreniye, No. 5 (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1975), p. 136.

2 Ya. Zaslavsky, Ideological Struggle and Contemporary Culture (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1982), p. 193.

repetition of experience in Mrs. Falloway, and repetition of structure in To the Lighthouse, The Waves and Between the Acts. Repetition is also evident in the remembrance of the past events by the characters -- Clarissa Falloways' recollection of her girlhood at Bourton, and Cam's recollection of the stag's head. In The Waves Bernard manages to bring various ideas and associations together in the image of the slowly forming drop. It is made up of repetitions run together; the moment of its falling is unique, and it leaves behind it a space in which a new drop can be formed. Virginia Woolf seeks in her art, like Bernard, a fully conscious acceptance of this rhythm of repeated creation and dissolution which is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again, and this imparts an inherent poetic rhythm to the novels.

Virginia Woolf's commanding sense of the pictorial art also adds a poetic dimension to her novels. She does not duplicate reality. A deep probing of the psyche through senses suffices for her, and she strives to present a complete complex of events or emotions with the help of just one word. She writes in her essay, "Walter Pickett":

...painting and writing have much to tell each other; they have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see. Gardens, rivers, skies, clouds changing, the colour of a woman's dress, landscapes that bask beneath lovers, twisted woods that people walk in when they quarrel -- novels are full of pictures like these. The novelist is always saying to himself how can I bring the sun on to my page? How can I show the night and the moon rising? And he must often think that to describe a scene is the worst way to show it. It must be done with one word, or with one word in skilful contrast with another.¹

This essay indicates the wide range of Virginia Woolf's interest in the use of colours in literature. In her novels, particularly in The Waves, she uses colour in quite a new way, which is akin to Cézanne's. Like Cézanne's paintings, colour is an integral part of her plastic expression. This use also builds up a poetic resonance in her novels while adding the qualities of painting to some passages.

In The Waves Virginia Woolf uses colour to create psychological effect and at the same time to give the idea of organisation on the surface of the canvas by means of the interludes. In this novel, we see things in a half-light, as if beneath the waves. The strange qualities of light are exploited in an impressionistic manner. Our vision seems to pierce through thick

1 "Walter Sickert", Collected Essays, Vol. 2, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Chatto and Windus, 1972), p. 241.

air as the light changes and objects lose their familiar contours. The objects are distorted by the angle of the light falling upon them : "Here lay knife, fork and glass, but lengthened, swollen, and made portentous."¹ Throughout the novel solid tableware is lengthened or converted into light in this way. Virginia Woolf uses colours to suggest poetically the deeper complexities of human attitude, which lends a poetic charm to her prose narratives. Her experiments with different languages of colour involve the question of the relationship between language and reality.

Similarly, Virginia Woolf's use of space, perspective and background suggests a poetic approach towards her themes. Her typographical devices are a way of marking the boundaries of language. She creates literal space and suggestively makes use of dots, both of which are often seen as the typical devices of the stream-of-consciousness novel. But she uses these devices poetically as a way of opening the mind to impressions as part of an artistic system. She employs dots to suggest space poetically. The idea of disconnected movements within a landscape is beautifully presented with the help of dots in the following passage:

1 The Waves, p. 148.

A window tinged yellow about two feet across alone combated the white fields and the black trees.... At six o'clock a man's figure carrying a lantern crossed the field.... A raft of twigs stayed upon a stone, suddenly detached itself, and floated towards the culvert.... A load of snow slipped and fell from a fir branch.... Later there was a mournful cry.... A motorcar came along the road shoving the dark before it.... The dark shut down behind it....¹

The use of dots in this passage suggests visual, temporal and spatial dimensions.

In Virginia Woolf's novels space has a double nature. It can be seen as reassuring freedom and also as frightening negation. In her essay on Sickert she discovers a silence at the heart of art, just as Mrs. Falloway, the society hostess discovers an emptiness at the heart of life. There is the silence of space and the emptiness of speech. The silent interludes of The Waves achieve emptiness by banishing human beings. In Between the Acts emptiness and silence are insistently evoked. The mist and fog are part of the theme of illusion in Night and Day. In The Years the acrid smoke of burning leaves constantly drifts into the emptiness of space. The image of the birds rising and falling is also a recurrent image in her work. The birds are seen acting in a group as if they are tied with an

1 Jacob's Room, p. 95.

invisible thread. In this image can be seen both the freedom and restraint of space. The car, the aeroplane, the spider's web, the rising and falling of rocks are at once spatial and psychological -- obsessive 'private' images which Virginia Woolf makes public and poetically meaningful in the course of her fictional work. These spatial devices help her in gaining the suggestivity and delicacy of poetry.

Virginia Woolf is essentially a poet, writing in the medium of prose, and this fact can be seen not only in her novels, but also in her other writings. Once driving through Sussex one evening, she has remarked in noticeably Wordsworthian terms:

...one is overcome by beauty extravagantly greater than one could expect... one's perceptions blow out rapidly like air balls expended by sudden rush of air, and then, when all seems blown to its fullest and tautest, with beauty and beauty and beauty, a pin pricks; it collapses.¹

In her novels also, we find that her imagination penetrates the inner structure of the natural panorama. She presents the beauty of the natural world, but her effort is not simply to please the eye. Her poetic approach enhances our awareness of the solidity and the pattern embedded in a visual object. In her prose narratives the eye, the ear and the nose function marvellously well. If

1 Virginia Woolf, "Evening over Sussex : Reflections in a Motor Car", Collected Essays, Vol. 2, p. 290.

Jacob's Room, Mrs. Falloway and To the Lighthouse evoke the visual sensations, The Waves evokes the auditory and Flush the olfactory. Visual, auditory and olfactory sensitiveness creates a poetic atmosphere in her novels. The visual images which the fresh June morning casts before Clarissa Falloway take her back to Bourton when she was there at eighteen; and these memories provide propulsion to 'action' in the novel. The intensity of visual appeal imparts a poetic depth to Virginia Woolf's novels. The fusion of sight and sound provides a rhythmic texture, organising sound to its poetic use.

Virginia Woolf's excellence lies in the poetic embodiment of experience with remarkable particularity. Her basically poetic temperament compels her to view things not as they appear, but as they are -- and this attitude accounts for the underlying poetry of her works. Also, her poetry emanates from the intensity of feelings, which is discernible in the presentation of deeper psychological feelings, emphasized by an exploratory-creative use of language. She often associates random moments of being to create an epiphany like a poet. About Pastoevsky, she remarks:

Alone among writers Pastoevsky has the power of reconstructing these most swift and complicated states of mind, of re-thinking the whole train of thought in all its speed, now as it flashes into light, now as it lapses into darkness;

other resources of words. This method provides increased specification and particularization, and at the same time, paradoxically, it provides enlargement and enrichment to the work. Obviously, the significance of the whole is at once specified and universalized, as it is done in good poetry.

Virginia Woolf maintains that prose can never be as effective as poetry or music. Poetry exploits all communicative aspects of language, other than the merely semantic, to convey different aspects of reality simultaneously. By approximating his medium of communication to that of a poet or a musician, a novelist can be effective. And this is exactly what Virginia Woolf does in the role of a novelist. She converts the novel into an epic of individual sensitivity. She uses the common language as if it were her own invention. Words and their sound arrangements, rhythm and rhyme function in a subtler manner to suggest the meaning poetically. Consequently, her use of language imparts a unique poetic dimension to her novels. In fact, Virginia Woolf's language has astonishing power, subtlety and range. It is exceptionally rich and poetic, and possesses a vitality which is, indeed, rare. She uses not only the language of words, but also the language of gesture and action.

Virginia Woolf's extensive use of symbols also helps in imparting poetic depth and atmosphere to her novels. We find a well thought-out theory of the symbol scattered throughout her critical and expository writings. The symbols aesthetically rationalize her effort to create a way out of the dilemma of human beings. She thinks that the symbols should be instant, and should have some similarity to the things symbolized. The symbols should not inform, but suggest and evoke.¹

Virginia Woolf also explains how symbols work and affect our minds, how they give us an insight into things, and how they reveal in a flash the depths of meaning. In her works the repeated images, working on our senses by suggesting emotions or ideas, become symbolic. The recurrence of these symbols is deliberate for the poetic presentation of qualitative feeling. Symbols are enriched by constant repetition and they enrich the context in turn. The same symbol used in varied circumstances and situations suggests varied states of emotions and feelings. But as it occurs, it has the power to hold the earlier associations together. The symbols thus add to the poetic charm of Virginia Woolf's prose narratives. She also uses character, atmosphere, locations and actions symbolically. Such

1 A Writer's Diary, ed. Leonard Woolf (London : Triad/Grafton Books, 1985), p. 166.

symbols are aesthetically created to suggest and give insight into the ineffable in human thoughts and feelings, or to heighten and make splendid the desired emotions and ideas. In one of her essays on Turgenev, she observes:

For in this highly suggestive art the effect has been produced by a thousand small touches which accumulate, but cannot be pinned down in one great scene.¹

This is also applicable to Virginia Woolf. In her clarity lie profound poetic depths, and her brevity holds in it the suggestion of a large world. In her novels, from Jacob's Room to The Waves, there is far less scene-setting and none of it obvious; deliberate stage-managing disappears, and this method is fundamentally poetic. The very nature of her writing necessitates the use of imaginative and poetic prose. Her poetic novels cannot be termed as "an inevitable product of literary commodity economy," as B. Arvatov thinks.² She borrows from the technique of poetry while retaining the essential prose-rhythms. She evinces a true artistic insight into the possibilities and limitations of her medium. She digs into the labyrinth of the unconscious, instead of exchanging it for the 'ready cash' of small scale feelings and experiences.³

1 "A Giant with Very Small Thumbs", Books and Portraits, p. 133.

2 B. Arvatov, Sociological Poetics (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 138.

3 Valentina Ivasheva, On the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century : the Technological Revolution and Literature (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1978), p. 208.

Virginia Woolf is in the tradition of Plato, Rousseau, John Donne, Thomas Browne and the translators of the Authorized Version.¹ Her novels are replete with the suggestivity and resonance of saturated poetry. She is not only a great novelist, but also "a poet."² The poetic strain in her novels shows not only the new possibilities of the genre, but also re-echoes with remarkable clarity the emotional harmonies and discords of her times.

In short, Virginia Woolf's fiction stands alone in the history of the English novel, not so much for her skill in observing life's details, its beauty, colours, smells, catchwords and dead-ends, as for the agonising mode of her comprehension, which grapples poetically with questions of the meaning of life. Her poetic novels help us to understand the impulses in man's nature. But at the same time, they poetically postulate the impossibility of ever knowing man completely. Her intuitive poetic vision makes her almost a seer, who helps people discover new truths about themselves. Her poetic novels enable us to see ourselves and the world of man in all its transience and its grandeur, its virtues and its values, its beauty and the inscrutability of its existence.

1 R. L. Chambers, The Novels of Virginia Woolf (London : Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1957), pp. 58-9.

2 Peter Burra, "Review", Nineteenth Century (Jan., 1934), pp. 112-25.

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